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HIGH

Seth Kallen Deitch

UH-OH!

by

Seth Kallen Deitch

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FIRST EDITION

UH-OH!

The doubtful adventures of Jake Zimmer, aspiring pulp writer.

1
Unlikely Hours

It was a good job. The place was called Crandall Labs, I had no idea what precisely they did, but it was “big” science and they had a lot of government contracts. The job came to me via a reference from an old buddy, the guy who previously held it. I rarely saw my boss, I was mostly left to myself and the money was pretty good. The hours were the exact opposite of the ones I had been keeping at my last job. Eight PM to six AM, the night shift. Peaceful. A whole different pace.

My job was simple to the point of absurdity, I merely had to monitor the network and make sure that any new files that came into the server were in the right folders so the techs could find them in the morning. This took up about two minutes once an hour or so.

The rest of my time was spent drinking coffee, shooting the bull with Bob, the downstairs security guard, or posting to Usenet about details of my admiration for pulp author, Johnston McCulley.

When I went out to smoke or to the all night market in the strip mall next door, I would surprise rats that hung near the back door dumpster. They would skitter into the shadows silently when they heard me step out, then observe me from the obscurity with eyes of a black just a tiny bit shinier than the black that enveloped them. There was an owl in the neighborhood who controlled their numbers, and presumably made their lives exciting. The rats always seemed like they were up to something. Something besides eating garbage, I mean. They looked sneaky.

The coffee from the convenience store had that “been in the pot to long” flavor. Hot, metallic, even when it was freshly brewed. I have no idea how they did it and asking would do me no good. The clerk was a generic brown-skinned man with a generic brown-skinned man accent that gave me no clue to his national origin. Most of humanity is some shade of brown. This fellow sort of pretended to understand English, but all he really ever said was “Yes, very good!” or tell me how much I owed. The radio behind the counter constantly emitted some sort of eastern sounding pop music, reedy, wailing. It was a faraway sound that added to the night’s edgy ambience. Once in a while there was a brown-skinned boy, about six years old, thin and delicate looking in a stained Pikachu T-shirt who wandered about the store. I wondered what a child his age was doing up so late. He must be nocturnal like me. I once saw him making a fort of plastic milk crates out by the dumpster. He only spoke Hindustani or Quechua or Malay or what ever the hell it

was, but that was only when he spoke at all. Mostly he just gazed inquiringly with large brown eyes. His expression was at odds with the unalloyed positivity of the cartoon character on his chest. He and Pikachu inhabited different universes.

One time I bought a hot dog there and sat on the back stoop to eat it. A rat watched me speculatively from under the dumpster. On a whim, I broke the end off the frank and tossed it to him. He emerged from his shelter, his beady eyes scanning me with suspicion, and sniffed the morsel. The small rodent grunted and turned his back on the meat, sweeping it aside with his naked tail. I tossed the rest of the dog in the dumpster. If a rat won't eat it, I probably shouldn't either.

These were weird rats anyway. I would often step out the back to find them standing in a row or a circle, or walking in a line. Once I saw three of them stripping insulation from the wires of a discarded toaster with their sharp incisors. They broke off bits of the shiny wire and were carrying them away to God-knows-where. They scattered when they saw me.

Other odd things went on. From time to time I would hear a weird, cartoony voice reciting passages from "Moby Dick". Probably just some stupid screen saver, but it would catch me by surprise from time to time and give me a major case of the willies.

The nights blended into one another and I barely saw any of my friends or family. To them I was this ghost who sent them e-mails and left notes on the refrigerator. I rose at seven PM, even on weekends. By the time I was really ready to go out and do things, most of my friends were either in bed or working on their last drink. My weekend nights were mostly spent working on my novel "The New Adventures of the Son of Zorro", and watching late movies. The novel occupied much of my time at work as well. In this tale, Don Ricardo Vega (son of the original Zorro, who's story is told in Johnston McCulley's "The Curse of Capistrano" and several other pulp serials) is forced once more to don the mask of the legendary hero to protect the people from a deranged scientist with a mysterious airship who sought domination of the West. High adventure, right? It added to the odd atmosphere of my job that my mind was in picturesque old Spanish California while I was in twenty-first century Massachusetts on non-picturesque Route 128. As I worked on my book, I periodically printed out sections of the manuscript in progress to review and to show people. Copies kept disappearing. An overzealous janitor, I assumed.

On one Wednesday morning, I stopped in on my friend Jerry who generally was rising for his hard day of studied unemployment around the time I was arriving home from work. The guy makes a fine cup of Java and is actually capable of having a semi-coherent conversation fresh out of bed, although the subject was usually whatever loony dream he had just been having. They mostly involved discovering arcane jazz records in strange places. He said that he frequently

actually heard the content of these non-existent discs. I just assumed that he had some sort of connection to alternate dimensions and left it at that. He tended to agree.

"I was in a rooming house in Paducah, Kentucky, the place was run by a hunchback with a propeller beanie. It was an old Victorian. There was a beautifully carved organ in the parlor. On an end table next to it was a small cut glass dish of parlor beans. In my dream, I somehow knew that any Victorian parlor worthy of the name had a dish or two of these dry, rich brown beans sitting about. Of their purpose, I can tell you nothing. The second day I was there, I noticed that the legs of all the furniture were replaced with stacks of old records. When the hunchback wasn't looking, I took down the end table and started looking at the titles.

"*Bad Breaks and Bacon Grease*" by Eddie Fuller and his Collegiate Halfbacks.

"*Dizzy Spells*" by the Bob Handle Five.

"*Out of my Album*" by Olga Bibor and her Peasant Jazz Orchestra.

"*Back Forty*" by the Jiving Jazz Farmers.

"*Roll when you Walk*" by Curley Johnson.

"*Two Cats in the Alley*" by Buddy Watson's Swinging Serenaders.

"*Harlem Hijinks*" by Tall John Worrell.

"*What's It To Ya'?"* by Johnny James and his Sioux City Syncopators.

The hunchback caught me and warned me, 'Those are sinful sounds!" Then I woke up."

"Are any of those records real?"

"Not in this universe."

I stirred my coffee even though I don't take anything in it.

"So, Jake", he asked me, "how much longer are you planning on keeping these unlikely hours?"

"I dunno, as long as it takes, I guess. The money's pretty good and I don't really have to do much."

"Uh-huh. So what goes on there?"

"I don't know what they actually do there. I have to keep an eye on some computers. I think the rats are up to something." I didn't know how odd it would sound until I actually said it out loud.

Jerry raised his eyebrows. "The *hell* you say! 'Up to something'? How do you mean?"

"They're acting sneaky."

"Isn't sneaky how rats act?"

"These ones act sneaky in unusual ways and when they see they are being watched, they start acting sneaky in the regular way."

"So you can tell the difference between 'regular' sneaky and 'unusual' sneaky?"

"When *you* say it, it sounds stupid."

"I have a feeling it would sound about the same coming out of anyone."

Jerry played me a few new 78rpm acquisitions and I went home to bed.

As the weeks wore on, the sureality of my situation seemed to fade somewhat. I got use to my largely solitary life, even grew to like it. I came, I kept an eye on things, I went home, I slept. Every Friday, an interoffice envelope contained my paycheck. The brown-skinned man continued to dispense plastic wrapped nourishment, Bob, the security guard continued to lie about all the women he slept with, the rats continued to scheme.

Night isn't dark, at least the night I inhabited wasn't. It was illuminated by a variety of lamps, each with its own distinctive character. The even white of the florescent tubes that flickered and dimmed. At least one was always out, but a different one every night. The light from the monitors, either those with any of several whimsical screen savers, or the one at which I wrote, covered with lines of text. They provided even light only if viewed head on. In my peripheral vision, they rolled and fluttered. The Tungsten lamps over the security station made everything look yellow to my florescent acclimated eyes. The brilliant Sodium lights in the parking lot were like stars too close to Earth. The areas directly beneath them were lit bright as high noon. Tendrils of black shadow marked each slight ripple in the pavement. It looked like pictures from the Moon. The darkness was always kept outside the realm of human activity, but it seemed to creep and insinuate. I felt that the darkness knew it owned these hours and was being unfairly deprived of a portion of its rightful dominion. It struggled to reclaim as much as it could.

A mangy, feral tomcat made its home in a stand of trees by the side of the highway. Its genetic background must have been peculiar because it was mostly solid gray, but had tabby markings on its rump and hind legs and black paws. A raccoon mask adorned its face. I had never seen another cat with a similar coat. It haunted the convenience store dumpster and sometimes caught one of the rats. I saw this occur on one occasion. The stricken rat's fellows, instead of staying hidden, gathered to watch the cat carry away the twitching carcass, huddled, seemingly for mutual comfort. They dispersed only when I came within six feet of the group.

I saw part of the victim on my way into work the next night by the side of the highway. I noticed that it was white rather than the generic brown or gray that rats usually were, its fur was just very soiled.

Jerry placed a cup of African roast in front of me.

"The rats are up to something. I know it."

"Again with the rats. You need another job. One where you have human beings to talk to."

"I don't *talk* to them. I have been *observing* them and they are ***up to something***."

Jerry was taken aback by my intensity.

"Let me ask you…what would they want with copper wire? Do rats morn their dead? They are keeping an eye on me."

"Shut up! You are freaking me out. Let the filthy rodents have their world and you get a fucking grip on yours." He smiled when he said it, but I got the impression that he really thought I might be wigging out a little.

I stopped mentioning the rats to Jerry after that morning. Our conversations returned to the usual subjects of old jazz, Zeppelin technology and women. Old jazz was the constant standard, Zeppelins were something I was researching for my book and women were what neither one of us had at the moment.

That night, I watched for an hour as one rat made trip after trip to the dumpster to retrieve only the cellophane wraps from packs of cigarettes. He made, like, thirty trips, just for cellophane.

When I was at the store, I asked the man about the rats.

"Let me ask you, sir, have you noticed anything unusual about the rats?"

"Yes, very good!"

"No, no, no. the ***rats***. The ones that live by the dumpster."

He looked at me quizzically. "We don't have."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not saying you are infested with them."

"No, not interested.", he agreed.

"But, have you noticed the rats?"

"Eighty-nine cent each." He declared with absolute certainty.

"I don't want to buy them…ah, never mind, just ring me up for this." I placed a sixteen ounce bottle of JOLT Cola and a pre-packaged egg-salad sandwich on the counter. He just stared at me.

"Um, don't you want money?"

"You don't want to buy!"

"I want the sandwich and the soda, I just don't want rats."

"Yes, very good! No rats!" He started merrily punching keys on the register. I have no idea what he thought our conversation had been about.

The air was hot, humid and still that night. The dumpsters exuded a rich, cadaver breath flavored putrescence. The smoke from my cigarette hung in the air congealed, as if it feared dissipation, the way a human fears death.

From across the parking lot I heard a tortured yowl. The cat had bolted from beneath Crandall's dumpster stopping every few feet to claw frantically at its face. As it came beneath one of the Sodium lights, I saw that its furry mask was blood streaked from a wounded eye. Beneath the dumpster were a dozen beady gloss-black reflections.

The cat rolled on the pavement beneath the lamp and finally dashed off to its woods. I walked up to the patch of light on the ground where the cat had paused.

On the ground was a pencil with a blood-stained blade made from a part of an Aluminum soda can bound to it with multiple wraps of copper wire.

In spite of the hot night, I shivered.

I didn't see the cat for several nights. Just when I had assumed that he must be dead, he reappeared, gaunt and starving. He moved sluggishly on one side of his body. Evidently, the blade had touched his brain also. A loose lid now lay concave over the space of his ruined eye. The need for food had forced him to overcome his misery. For the rest of his life he would root through garbage for sustenance. With only one eye, his days as an effective hunter were over.

I couldn't do the same thing all the time. I would get blocked on the novel, I would become infuriated with some response I got on alt.fan.zorro (being called a "nerdy fanboy" by someone who admits, nay *brags*, that he wears a "Star Trek" uniform to weddings, is just *too* much), sometimes I will simply have had too much coffee. I started hacking into files on some of the work stations and found out about a handful of Crandall's projects. I'm not boasting, security on the files I found was pretty lax. It didn't take anything like an expert to find them. As often as not there was a link on the desktop. Or a folder labeled "Project files".

They had been working on a few things that were more or less boring and that I had unclear understanding of, stuff like wireless network cards. Useful, no doubt, but not too sexy. More interesting was similar work on a version of the same thing that was actually implanted in a user's body that would allow them to communicate with a computer network without any other appliance. They had tested it with various animals. It allowed the test animals to remember how they performed tasks and compare their previous solutions with the current problem. They had made a mouse that could use its eyes for the computer to read books for the blind. They had studied the notion of using birds and bats for remote probes. Another experiment had used a parrot as a text-to-speech tool that was easier to understand and had more inflection than a synthesized voice. That explained "Moby Dick". The implant could be made cheaply compared to manufacturing a robot to perform the same task. Interesting. These gizmos could give even creatures with small brains, access to computer resources. The reports claimed that the minds of the animals could effectively be enlarged to human levels with the computer network doing much of the actual data handling.

In the distance, from behind some closed laboratory door, a comically inhuman voice squawked "…ere now it has been related how Ahab was wont to pace his quarter-deck, taking regular turns at either limit…"

I now *officially* had the willies.

I dug up and printed out every paper on the subject I could find and put them in an envelope to take home and read in depth.

I was having a second cup of coffee and Jerry was still reading.

“I had no idea they could actually *do* this sort of thing.”, Said Jerry.

“Neither did I. Do you suppose that the rats were worked on that way?”

“Come on!” He put the papers down. “You are obsessed with those rats!”

“They experiment on rats.”

“They experiment on the cute white rats not on gray sewer rats.”

“The rats are really white, not gray. I saw one up close, he was just dirty, or…”

“Or what?”

“Or maybe they change the color of their fur on purpose. Disguise. ”

Jerry rolled his eyes. “Look, I want to acquaint you with some psychological terminology. Do you know what ‘paranoid’ means?”

“Don’t screw with me. What do *you* think is going on then?”

“I think that being by yourself and weird hours are getting to you. You need to get another job.”

That problem was solved for me. When I went into work that evening, Bob stopped me at the sign-in desk and handed me an envelope. It contained a check and a termination notice. I had somehow been caught copying confidential information off the network. There was no one to blame but myself. I violated their trust in me. The pink slip (no, it wasn’t really pink) said that legal action may follow my termination, the case was under study by their attorneys.

Bob was professional, but not unfriendly as he escorted me to the parking lot.

My severance pay was generous enough for me to sit home and write and watch TV for about a month before I had to find another job. Day by day, I tried to switch my sleep schedule back to something more normal.

A week to the day after I was fired, Jerry and I were in a pub drinking beer and arguing about the possibility of 19th century steam-powered biplanes when I saw a face appear on the TV over the bar. It was the son of the convenience store guy, the somber brown eyes were unmistakable.

I shouted to the bartender. “Turn up the sound!”

“...although the body had not been sexually assaulted. Risal Nizar was six years old.” The face of the brown-skinned man appeared on the screen, looking distraught. Beneath the image a caption read, “Marzuki Nizar, victim’s father.”

"My son....very good boy, very good! What bad person should do this thing? Why?” The grim faced commentator moved on. “In other local news...”

I turned to Jerry. “That was the kid I told you about!”

“From the ‘Kwik-E-Mart’?”

“‘Lil’ Peach’, actually, but yes.”

We had to wait for a recap of the report to get the whole story. The cops didn’t know exactly what kind of weapon was used in the killing. The child had died from blood loss out of many small wounds. I spite of that, they didn’t believe he

had been tortured, rather death had come quickly. His body had been found in his makeshift fort of milk crates.

"Jerry…"

"I swear to freaking God, if you so much as *mention* rats..."

"What the hell else could it be? The kid must have pissed them off in some way, maybe saw something he wasn't supposed to see."

Somehow, I talked him into going with me that night. I'm sure that buying him beer and then shots of Laphroaig for a few hours had something to do with it.

The parking lot was still and quiet in the muggy night. There were still police tapes up around the back of the convenience store. The store itself was closed. There were no cars in the lot except for Bob's, so I assumed that they hadn't found a replacement for me yet.

We parked at the mall rather than in front of Crandall so that Bob wouldn't notice. He would recognize my car. I don't know if he would call the cops on me or not, but I didn't want to find out.

We sat in the car with cups of Burger King coffee for a few minutes.

"So…, what exactly are we looking for?" Jerry politely inquired.

"Anything weird."

"Weirder than the guy sitting next to me, you mean?"

"Shaddup."

"Nothing weird is going to happen." As if to instantly make him a liar, there was a tapping on the driver side window. It was a cop with a flashlight, now shining directly into my eyes.

"How are you gentlemen tonight?", he inquired.

"Just fine, officer.", I said.

"Are you aware that all of the stores are closed at this hour?"

"We thought we could get some sandwiches at the Lil' Peach.", I lied.

"It's closed tonight."

"So we discovered. We were just thinking where to go next."

"There is a Store 24 a mile up the road." The cop pointed with his flashlight. Just then I saw Bob walking toward the car.

"I just came down to see what was going on.", he said to the patrolman. And then he recognized me. "Hey Jake!"

"You know this guy?" The cop eyed me.

"Yeah. He just got let go from Crandall last week."

"Crap.", I thought.

"Could you gentlemen get out of the car please?", asked the cop politely.

Jerry looked at me with utter disgust. "I'm going to kick your ass."

There was an ID check, and a pat down for Jerry and I. The cop quizzed Bob on everything he knew about me. His responses made me sound like a pretty unsavory

character. For some stupid reason “quiet” and “keeps mostly to himself” are red flags to the police.

The officer asked me, “Why did you *really* come out here tonight? It won’t help you to lie.”

To this day Jerry swears my response made him want to kill me right then and there. I guess I was lucky that he only punched me in the back of the head. “The rats are up to something officer.”

After the cop separated and cuffed us both, he came back and asked me to repeat myself. His partner had now stepped out of the cruiser to join us.

“The rats are up to something.”

“Is that the best you can do? All I know is that you are some kind of weirdo who just got fired from over there, and now you are back here with a ridiculous explanation at the scene of a sick murder. You understand what this looks like, don’t you?”

Up until that second, I didn’t, but the implication of what he was getting at suddenly dawned on me. “Are you crazy?!? I didn’t kill that kid!”

“Did I say you killed anyone?”

“I saw about it on the news! That’s what you think!”

“So now you read minds, and you think the rats are up to something.” He looked at his partner significantly, who looked back and twirled an index finger near his temple.

I rolled my eyes when I saw the gesture. “That is *so* unprofessional, officer!”

Jerry said, “Shut up, Jake.”

For once in my life, I took good advice and zipped it.

The officer was just holding my head as I was getting into the cruiser when a sound came from the Crandall lot. A fizzing, snapping sound.

There was light coming from in back of the big dumpster. Suddenly, with an explosion and a crash of steel on blacktop, the big steel container overturned spilling trash everywhere. A discarded computer monitor bounced across the lot and landed on the hood of Bob’s car, denting it.

“What the fu…..” Bob forgot the rest of his sentence. There was a loud hissing noise like escaping gas under pressure and then we saw it. For what it was, it wasn’t large, but it was plenty large enough. Floating free of the dumpster, it rose like a great diaphanous cigar the size of a city bus. It was a rigid frame airship made from things like old umbrella ribs, bicycle spokes cellophane, egg cartons and a number of small electric motors. It was lit inside and through the translucent envelope, numerous rats could be seen running to and fro.

The cop let go of me and I bumped my head hard on the doorframe. “Son of a bitch!” I yelled.

Jerry was repeating, “You were right, you were right, you were right…” over and over again.

Several of the rats gathered on the side of the dirigible that was closest to us, looking at us. They were now clean and snowy white. It was impossible to read their expressions, but I had an idea what they were thinking.

“This isn’t good.” I said.

The airship advanced toward us and dropped down to about twenty feet in altitude. A rat suddenly swung down from the envelope on a salvaged length of lamp cord, right past the face of one of the cops. There was a bright reflection from a blade as the rodent zipped by the policeman’s face. Blood ran down his cheek into which a small letter Z had been carved.

“Uh-oh!” I said. They had access to everything that had ever been on the Crandall network. Apparently Zorro had made an impression.

The cop pulled his pistol and took a shot at the miniature Zeppelin.

“No!” I yelled. “Don’t antagonize them!”

“Why the hell not?!?” exclaimed Jerry, “They killed that kid!”

“Because they'll kill us too, but they can’t get far if we just let them alone.”

The other cop, the one who wasn’t clutching his face in pain, asked, “Why not? Why can’t they get far?”

I was about to answer when twenty more of them swung toward us and we had to dive behind the cop car or be slashed to bits. I smashed my mouth on the pavement because the cuffs held my hands behind me. “Son of a bitch!” I burbled through my mouth full of blood.

We heard the tiny blades scratch the finish of my car and the cruiser as they zoomed past. The rat Zeppelin was directly overhead. I looked up to see that there were at least fifty of them, each and every one too smart for its own good. It was clear that the gas envelope was separate from the section that contained the “crew”. I wondered where they got the Helium. Did it *use* Helium?

A smoking Diet Dr. Pepper can dropped from the sky and rolled under the cruiser.

“Run!” I hollered. As we all beat it for the trees there was a deep throated **THUMP!!** The cop car jumped about two feet in the air and hit the pavement hard. Two heartbeats later, its gas tank exploded. We felt the heat from forty yards away. The paint on the rear side of my car was totally bubbled.

The cop called to Bob, “Get back to your desk! Call for help!” The security guard started to hot-foot it back to the building when another can was ejected from the rogue aircraft. It landed twenty feet behind him and exploded. Bob lay unconscious, but apparently in one piece on the pavement.

Jerry and I were still in cuffs and I had fallen on my face when the police car blew up. I hadn't actually broken my nose, but I was bleeding pretty badly. The stand of trees was still fifty yards away.

"Damn it! Can you *PLEASE* get these fucking cuffs off me?" One of the cops unlocked Jerry and I and we both rubbed our wrists. I touched my nose gingerly, it hurt like hell. My lips were swollen like two plums, my lower face, sticky.

The glowing airship swept past us and another smoking can fell into the trees followed by another **THUMP!** Birds (among them, the owl) exploded out of the branches and the cat came running out and vanished into the distance like demons from Hell were after it. I suppose, from his perspective, they were. One of the cops stood up and emptied his pistol in the direction of the fleeing airship. It had no obvious effect.

I hollered at the cop. "Let it go! All we have to do is follow it."

The police radio was destroyed, but the cops were able to call for back up on my cell phone.

When some other cruisers and an ambulance arrived on the scene, Jerry and I piled into the back seat of one of the cop cars that took up the chase. One of the cops started to object, but changed his mind and ignored us for the moment. We shot down the road attempting to keep the airship in sight, but ended up losing it. By that time a helicopter had been dispatched.

They decided that their goal was to get the device in tow and then get animal control involved. It was difficult to approach the craft. One attempt resulted in an exploding Pepsi can being launched in their direction. It exploded close enough to the chopper to give it a good nudge.

Around that time, the pilot reported that the flight of the bizarre aircraft was becoming increasingly erratic. Within a few minutes the dirigible seemed to be no longer under intelligent guidance. It drifted listlessly with only one of the small motors still running, lending it a slow, off center spin. An hour later, it hung nose down about thirty feet above a residential street in Framingham at the mercy of the rare gentle breezes. Inside the rats were milling around, sleeping or brawling with one another.

I had figured correctly. The rats were no longer a threat.

The police helicopter slowly and carefully towed the delicate , makeshift aircraft to a State police station where all of the rats could be captured and contained.

Crandall Labs had a *herd* of lawyers there an hour before dawn. They were claiming that the rats and the "artifact" were property of Crandall Laboratories, Incorporated and should be released to them immediately. They were laughed out of the station. The airship and the rats were evidence in several assaults and a possible homicide. At very least, the matter had to be reviewed by animal control before the disposition of the rats could be decided.

On the surface there did not appear to be anything out of the ordinary about the rats, save for the fact that many of them had tiny swords strapped to them and one of them was wearing corrective lenses on its eyes. One was sacrificed and dissected. An electronic device was discovered in its abdomen with a cable running into its brainstem. X-rays revealed that the others carried similar devices. Crandall's lawyers would not reveal what the devices were claiming that they represented a proprietary trade secret. The claim wouldn't stand up in court, but it would buy time for the Crandall execs to circle their wagons.

I discovered that Crandall was also planning to sue me for making public information from their network. That was because of the interview I gave a reporter from channel seven, but that happened the next day. That was a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation. I ultimately figured that I would rather be sued by Crandall than be charged with obstruction of justice.

I was given a ride to the hospital to get my poor abused face looked at. All I needed was a few stitches in my lower lip, some cotton up my nose and advice from the doctor not to lead with my chin. Very funny.

Jerry put a cup of coffee in front of me.

"I am so sorry for doubting you, dude."

"Ah, don't worry about it. I wouldn't have believed me either."

"So what happened to them? They had it made, they could have escaped."

"Nope, they never had a chance."

"Why? All they had to do was find a hiding place."

"I know what you're thinking, but you saw those critters, those were *not* super rats."

"I admit that they didn't seem to be."

"Those rats were *wired*. They were linked to the Crandall computer network by those devices implanted in them. That's how they were able to seem brainy, but all their information was from the computers. They were using that information to fulfill some sort of rat agenda, or even some weird notion from the computer itself. They seemed to have read my book."

"But why did they stop?"

"Range.", I said. "The range of the transmitters in the network appliances were really short, less than a couple of miles. They could only carry a small battery. It couldn't give the signal much ***oomph***."

"They got stupid when they got far enough away!"

"Yeah. I wonder how it happened. Did they all lose the connection around the same time, or did they lose it one by one? I wonder if any of them were able to grasp how they had screwed up."

The parking lot of Crandall labs was still overrun with police, hazmat workers (because the rats had been declared a biohazard) and reporters, *lots* of reporters. A

couple of tow trucks with winches were working to right the overturned dumpster and another was jacking up the civilian and police vehicles that had been damaged to be taken away.

In a drainpipe beneath the dumpster hid a single, brooding white rat. Alone with its thoughts, it planned for the future. Nearby processors fed him the language and the concepts to wrap around his vague rodent train of thought.

“The forces of evil have me cornered. They are smugly confident that I have been defeated, but they are wrong. Evil is always wrong, for once again shall rise son of Zorro!”

2
BooJoo

I have to admit, the band wasn't bad at all. I had tended to underestimate Jerry in the past because he always seemed to play his life kind of loose and goofy. The fact is that the guy has real talent. The band was called "The People's Republic of Bop", but they played in a number of jazz styles and Jerry blew cornet with them. I understand that they were actually taking in enough bread from their gigs to pay for their transportation and some beers.

Tonight they were in great form and rocking the house, the house in question being a hole in the wall gallery in Cambridge. They played a 20's style dance number. Jerry and two of the other band members stepped up to a mike and proceeded to sing in their best "Rhythm Boys" style:

It's BooJoo! The happy bunny!
He is never sad and always funny!
Whenever BooJoo comes to play,
It will be a happy day'
With BooJoo, the happy bunny

With BooJoo, it's always sunny
He is everybody's favorite bunny
Even on a rainy day,
BooJoo sweeps the clouds away!
He's BooooJooooo, the happy bunny!

The stupidity of the lyrics seemed inspired to my beer fueled imagination. What the heck was BooJoo? I made a point of asking Jerry the next day over coffee. Coffee with Jerry was a well practiced ceremony reflecting our often different schedules. It was rare that Jerry was up before ten in the morning, eleven was more usual. I see the sunrise every day, even Sundays. It doesn't matter if I'm working nights or days, but I'm pretty much done with night shifts. Coffee with Jerry was breakfast for him and early lunch for me. As he poured my second cup I mentioned the odd lyrics from the previous night.

He nodded his head. "Right, you wouldn't know because you didn't grow up here. You probably wouldn't even if you had. BooJoo was a kids show that ran for just a short time in the early seventies. If I called it second rate, I'd be paying it a huge compliment. It was more like fourth or fifth rate, really crappy. I think they only made about a dozen episodes. We caught it by accident when we were

channel surfing and getting stoned in my friend Bob's basement senior year of high school. We watched every day until it just disappeared."

"So why were you watching a fifth rate kids show?

"Aw, Jake, it was *so* weird! There was always a guest and the guest would do all the talking. They were really odd guests for a kid's show though"

"Odd, huh?"

"Yeah, like most kid's shows will have a guy from the zoo bring on animals or some kid's book author or some shit like that, but BooJoo had like *scientists* and stuff!"

"Scientists?"

"Yeah, or military guys. I remember this Air Force Captain that played piano, old standards and ragtime!"

"What the fuck?"

"Exactly…what the fuck."

"So what about BooJoo?"

"The bunny suit was strictly from the Bizzaro world! He was about six feet tall and pink and his ears were just these bent cylinders with rounded ends. He wore these blue shorts with big buttons and suspenders. The paws were just pink spray-painted oven mitts! He sometimes would be joined by Max, who was a *really* untalented clown. He only lasted a few episodes. He would come out and try to juggle but couldn't go more than a second or two. His biggest gags involved falling down."

"So, the bunny, was he like Barney or something? Did he sing and dance?"

"Well, sort of. The guest would do all the talking. The only time you would hear BooJoo's voice would be when he said his own name or sang these weird nonsense songs, didn't have any English words, just funny sounds."

At this point, I was getting a germ of an idea. I figured that I could write something about this show for one of the alternative weeklies for a few bucks. My career as a writer has somewhat solidified since I published my novel *The New Adventures of the Son of Zorro* on the web. A literary agent had seen it and started getting me published here and there. Mostly small magazines, but it provided some income and in my own mind, my star was rising. My latest project was a serial for an alternative weekly, the Boston *Big Idea*, called *Aviators of Tomorrow*. The episodes didn't run serially though and were actually random chapters from an imagined adventure book series for boys from the nineteen twenties. It was kind of high concept and I sure wasn't making a living off of it. I still needed to keep a full time job and that was a bit of a problem for a while after I had been fired from a night job at Crandall Labs, a high tech company on route 128 for unauthorized access to their computer network and inadvertently worsening their very peculiar rodent problem. It's a *long* story. It took me a while with the help of a good

lawyer (provided by the channel seven news in exchange for exclusive interviews) to get them to finally give me a decent reference. So, in spite of the setback, my life was once again on track. The reporter who interviewed me was a certain Lauren Vrabec and her coverage of my story helped get her promoted to weekend anchor at the station. Perhaps, I thought, she might feel well enough disposed toward me that she could help me out with some research. The fact is she's a pretty darned attractive gal and I was happy to have an excuse to pay her a visit.

I pumped Jerry for more info on the BooJoo show but it was hard to get the facts really straight seeing as he saw them all at least thirty years ago through the lens of being really high. I'm not judging him, hell we were *all* high back then, but still, details were scanty and variable.

It took a couple of days, but I was finally able to pin Lauren down on a time she could see me at her office. I hadn't seen her in person since the Crandall Labs business was over. I knew she was hot, but she looked so much better in person than on television. I did note that she still didn’t have a ring on her finger.

Lauren showed me a computer that had air records for the past forty years. It was basically like TV Guide listings showing every show the station had broadcast and, more importantly for me, what shows had been in the same time slot on other stations. It took me a little while probing around the first few years of the seventies, but then I found it. It had aired on channel 61 which is now a lesser *Telemundo* affiliate. *BooJoo the Happy Bunny* had an exactly three pm timeslot on weekdays pretty much ensuring most kids would miss it or at best catch only the last few minutes of it because they wouldn’t be home from school yet. I guessed that Jerry and his friends had seen it because they were blowing off their last class of the day.

I made a few screen shots and stored them on my jump drive, then headed for Lauren’s desk. She knew someone who worked over at WMUY channel 61, a guy who had been a news writer at channel seven was now news director over there. I got on the subway and headed for the studio that was near the Forrest Hills stop on the Orange Line.

The studio was a smallish two story brick office building. Lauren had called ahead and set up an appointment for me. This news director was as nice a guy as you would ever want to meet, but he didn’t know a damn thing about BooJoo. The station had changed hands twice since BooJoo had last aired. They did have a storage room full of old file cabinets, but he didn’t have the time to keep an eye on me while I went through stuff. He said I could come back during the overnight shift and the night station manager would be happy to help me. I had to work the next day so I went home to take a nap.

I was back at around 11:30 pm. I stopped outside the studio to have a smoke but put it out only half done when a rat skittered by about ten feet from me. Rats

give me the willies.

To me, it didn't look like the night manager had an awful lot to do. He was running a tape of *Green Acres* that was playing on several monitors. Whoever dubs Eva Gabor's voice in Spanish does a really nice job with the accent.

Small world department: it turns out that this guy, Bob Vera, had gone to high school with me in White Plains New York. He had been a year behind me, but I had actually known him a little bit. Everybody had called him "Berto" when he was a kid. Back then I had assumed he was Puerto Rican, but he was actually from a Cuban family and had been born right in White Plains. He had gone to tech school and ended up as a sound and video technician. There were textbooks all around his work station and I learned that he was working on a master's degree to become a real engineer. "Man, they have me reading up on some heavy stuff! I am mostly dealing with physics as it applies to electronics, but I had to take a general course just for background. You ever hear of something called 'String Theory'?"

"I've heard the word before, but I don't know what it's all about." I'm a bright enough guy, but I'm also a high school dropout. I have a lot to be proud of in terms of my self-education, but things like math and other disciplines that require a lot of math like physics and chemistry I have mostly ignored. I don't often admit it, but just about everything I think I know about science I learned from science fiction. As a result, a lot of what I think I know often turns out to be wrong, or at best incomplete.

"It's tricky stuff, man. They, like, think there are ten or eleven or maybe more dimensions of space, but most of them are all curled up on the quantum level! This book says that it represents the hyper-dimensional surface on which our universe resides!"

I nodded my head sagely. "Quantum level, hyper-dimensional, you don't say." I had no clue what he was talking about.

"That's way down there…smaller than atoms."

"Wow."

"And the math implies the existence of alternate universes. Some of them a lot like ours, some of them so different that they have different natural laws."

I had heard stuff like this and certainly seen the concept dealt with in SF, but I had no idea that real science types were taking this kind of thing seriously. In some inexplicable way, it almost takes the fun out of it. It's like reality is intruding on fantasy's turf.

Bob led me to the store room. It simultaneously was both smaller and more crowded than I had imagined it would be. Some of the file cabinets I wanted to get to had a desk thrown on top of them and a number of boxes that had been stuffed with papers and stacked on top of one another had predictably enough burst their sides and toppled over. Judging from the dust, it had happened a good twenty years

ago. This was going to take some work.

I didn't even know the sun had risen until Bob came by to tell me he was going off shift and I would have to wrap it up for the night. I had found some Beta cassettes that were just marked *transcriptions of afternoon programming-2nd quarter 1973*. Bob was more than happy to let me borrow them, in fact, he said that he doubted anyone would miss them if they were never seen again.

I was thinking it was going to be a real pain in the ass to find a Betamax machine to view these tapes on, but I lucked out. Jerry had one stashed in a closet. He had gone through a phase in the 80's when he had been recording music on beta cassettes. It was apparently one of the earliest digital formats. He had tons of live Miles Davis on them that I was going to have to hear at some point.

Jerry said, "It's weird, just last night I had a dream about Miles." Jazz musicians loomed large in Jerry's oneiric landscape.

"This ought to be good."

"We were having breakfast together…."

"You and Miles."

"Yeah, me and Miles. Let me finish. He was making waffles for the two of us. It was kind of weird how he made them. He just ladled pancake batter into a hot pan, not a waffle iron, but they still came out as waffles. He served them with soft butter and powdered sugar."

"After breakfast, he put a horn in front of me and demanded that I show him my stuff. This is *Miles*, right? How could I rate? I tried to blow but the horn would only make duck calls and fart noises and all the while Miles is laughing at me louder and louder. Then I woke up."

I really envy Jerry's dreams. Either I can't remember my dreams or they are about being at work. Then I wake up and have to go to work.

It took us a while to set up the VCR so it would work right with his TV. It didn't have a simple cable plug but had to be hooked up to the antenna terminals, but it didn't want to work until we actually unhooked the cable.

The afternoon programming was straight out of a can. The first tape picked up in the middle of a *Bowery Boys* short followed by an episode of *The Munsters* which in turn was followed by two back to back episodes of *Mr. Ed*. The commercials were all for laundry soap and TV dinners and crap like that. We fast forwarded through a couple of tapes like that stopping only to watch a *Three Stooges* short, *Three Arabian Nuts*, a Shemp, but still a funny one, but no BooJoo to be seen. It was on tape number three that BooJoo made his appearance. It was the very first episode taking up the timeslot of the first *Mr. Ed* from the previous two tapes.

The episode began with a close up of a smiling military officer whistling two clear notes and asking in a merry voice, "Can BooJoo come out to play?" There is a quick cut to the studio where we see BooJoo hopping through a patch of Astroturf

with cardboard cut out flowers stuck into it here and there. The theme song, sung by a female chorus comes up as BooJoo cocks his ear and hops toward the camera. The show's logo pops up and a voiceover announces, "Today BooJoo's special playmate is Captain John Iverson!"

There is a commercial for real estate in Minnesota and then we are looking at the military guy and BooJoo standing side by side. The uniform speaks.

"Hi kids! I'm Captain John Iverson of the United States Air Force and today I'm BooJoo's special playmate! And, who, you may be wondering, is BooJoo? Well, BooJoo is just about the very happiest bunny in the meadow."

At this point BooJoo bounces on his toes and, in kind of a strange voice, says "BooJoo the Happy Bunny!"

The Captain continued. "Every day BooJoo comes out to frolic with a special playmate! We'll play games and sing songs and we'll even watch cartoons!"

BooJoo starts jumping up and down. The Captain looks inquiringly over at him and then snaps his fingers. "I think BooJoo wants to sing one of his special BooJoo songs! Hey why don't we, and Max the Clown can join us!"

Max runs out into the shot. He is in whiteface with a big red nose and a frizzy blue wig. His loose one piece outfit is covered in huge red polka dots.
He goes up to BooJoo and asks, "Oh may I? I just *love* BooJoo songs!" BooJoo claps his hands and jumps up and down. This is the first time that the audience gets a good look at the oven mitt hands. They even still have the little loops for hanging them still attached. They appear to have been spray painted pink to match the rest of BooJoo.

The music starts and all three sing and do a strange dance in which they kick and spin and hop. The lyrics seem to be pure nonsense.

Moof, woo, woo
Wuf, wuf, wuf!
Oogah wotay joogah,
Ruf, ruf, ruf

Noogie, woogie, oogie pee
Oolah flambadula wee!

Moof, woo, moof
Wuf, wuf, wuf!
Oogah wotay joogah,
Ruf, ruf, ruf

It was just so freakin' weird! A clown, a weird looking bunny and an Air Force

officer doing this silly dance and singing this weird song. I guess I had seen similar stuff on other kids shows, but this seemed just a bit *off* somehow. This bunny really *was* weird looking too. He was almost all pink with these blue sort of Micky Mouse shorts with big buttons and suspenders. His body wasn't exactly furry. It looked sort of like it was covered in pink flocking except his face and a patch on his belly that was the same color but had a leathery sheen. From the top his feet just looked like big ovals, but you could see when he was dancing that there were three dark circular pads on their bottoms, two in the back and one in the front. His head was a domed cylinder and the two ears were narrower domed cylinders that rose from the head with a slight "s" curve. His eyes were just made from painted cardboard discs and didn't seem to be all that securely attached as they would waggle quite a bit when he moved. He had a cardboard bunny nose that had three big whiskers coming out of either side above a cardboard pair of big buck teeth and a lip curved into a silly grin.

After the dance Captain Iverson turns to Max and asks him, "So Max, do you live right here in the meadow?"

"I do, Captain John. Years ago, I was performing in a traveling circus and we stopped and set up in this beautiful meadow. After the show, I made myself a picnic lunch and went off eat it among the grass and flowers. After lunch, I was tired and took a nap, but I must have overslept because when I woke up it was the next morning!" Max had a really pronounced Boston accent.

"My goodness! You *did* oversleep."

"Yes and when I went back, I found that the circus had packed up and left without me!"

"How sad!"

"Oh, I *was* sad! But then I met BooJoo and we became best friends! So now I live in the meadow with BooJoo and all his playmates!"

"Hey, that's great!"

At this point BooJoo starts pointing directly at the camera and jumping up and down excitedly. The captain says "What's that, BooJoo? You say it's time for a cartoon? Well, let's all watch!" And the scene cuts to one of those weird old silent Felix the Cat cartoons where he has the detachable tail that he can use for a telescope or a golf club or whatever. Those ones are terrific when you're baked, but, God, I found it hard to believe that any kid in the seventies would have found this stuff very entertaining. Another commercial, this one for denture adhesive and we are back in the meadow. Now there is an upright piano. Captain Iverson sits down and plays and sings *Peg o' my Heart* while Max attempts a soft shoe. BooJoo watches and claps his oven mitt hands. If there was a kid alive in 1973 who didn't think this sucks, I'd like to meet him. Obviously the surrealism of this show appealed much more to Jerry and his stoned friends than it ever could have to

kids. This is followed by another gibberish BooJoo song and then, strangest of all Captain Iverson talks about the Air force and how the USAF is the most powerful military organization anywhere. It seemed so out of context. Then there was another equally old cartoon and BooJoo bid his friends goodbye. Roll credits.

"You were a *fan* of this shit?"

"It made sense at the time."

"Where were the commercials for breakfast cereal and Barbie dolls? Ferchristsake, they were selling stuff for *dentures*!"

"I know. Even back in the day, I knew this was some strange stuff."

I spent another night going through the WMUY storage room and came up with about fifteen BooJoo episodes and I was pretty sure that I now had the entire run of the series.

The string of BooJoo "playmates" on these shows were remarkable. Colonel Clifford R. Yeats, United States Army, who gave a dumbed-down lecture on artillery. He also, by the way, had a very nice singing voice. Dr. Alan Bourne, biochemist. He spoke briefly about pollution of the air and how even trace amounts of some chemicals in the air can be quite damaging to some organisms. Dr. Dorothy Hacking, Chemical engineer, spoke about petroleum distillation. She baffled Max the clown with card tricks as well. Dr. Charles Hines, physicist. He talked about alternate universes. *Alternate fucking universes*! He followed it up with a less-than-perfect performance of "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" on the banjo. I just didn't get it. It was like amateur night at the military/industrial complex.

From the credits I got the name of the producer, Howard D. Johns. I tried to look him up on the Internet Movie Database which very rarely fails to turn up information on almost anybody involved with movies or television. I got bupkis on Howard Johns. The only name in the credits I got a hit on was a guy named Delmar Krenwinkle III, a cameraman, and he still lived in the area.

I paid Krenwinkle a visit at another local station where he now worked as a director for cooking shows. He didn't remember much except that he was told that the show had been shot in a studio at Hanscom Field in Bedford and that it was supposedly being made for broadcast to military families living on bases throughout the country. Johns, it turned out was *US Air Force Colonel* Howard D. Johns! The entire production was a military project. Proxmire must have been pretty happy over how little money was spent on it.

I found out that Johns had died back in 1980. The director had been a Captain Michael Wright. He retired from the Air force about ten years back and got elected to congress representing the state of Delaware. I called his office in Washington and left a message that I was looking for information about the BooJoo show. The next day I received a call from his assistant saying that she had been told to inform

me that that particular project was still classified. Classified? He *must* have thought that I was asking about something else. In any case all further inquiries to his office were ignored.

I started to Google some of the scientists that had appeared on the show. Some were dead, some were out of the country. The only one who was still local *and* returned my call was the banjo plucking physicist, Charles Hines. As it happened he had also been the head writer on the show and he currently taught at MIT right here in Cambridge. I found him on the net as the author of the book *Retroflective Hyperspatial Modalities and Tuned Transcontinuum Parities*. That was just the title and it might as well have been in Chinese as far as I was concerned. This guy wrote BooJoo? When I called his office I spoke to a young woman, a graduate student. I got and appointment with Hines for early the next week without her even asking what my business with him might be.

That afternoon, I called Lauren from work to thank her again for setting me up with Channel 61 and to invite her out for a drink that evening. She was a little hesitant and I thought I was going to have to settle for coffee the next day. It was still better than I had any right to expect because I'm sure she had all kinds of guys chasing after her. She finally said yes to the drink. Persistence pays.

I showered and dressed at home trying to make myself look like the kind of guy I thought Lauren would look twice at. That was kind of a tough job seeing as I usually looked like the kind of guy she would toss a quarter to with the admonition that I spend it on food. Nonetheless, combed and cologned I met her at John Harvard's Brewhouse in Harvard Square an hour later. She came in shortly after I had found a table. She was still in her work clothes except that she had replaced her high heels with a pair of running shoes. That she had even shown up was a triumph for me.

She seemed happy enough to be there. Smiled, gave me an air-peck. Even after a full day of work she looked pretty fresh. She ordered a vodka martini, I asked for Lagovulin straight up.

"So," she said, "what have you got for me?"

What have I got? So this was strictly business. She thought I had a story for her. No matter, I could work with this. "I have been chasing down info on a really odd kids show and weirder and weirder stuff keeps turning up. I think the Air-force is involved and things might not be as they appear."

Lauren ever-so-slightly curled her lip. "I'm not going to get far with a conspiracy theory about a kids show."

"Stay with me, Lauren. I was right about the rats, wasn't I?"

She nodded her head. I had narrowly missed being thrown in jail for trespassing on a former employer who was doing animal experiments that involved networking living brains. I suspected that the rats were up to something, but no one else did. In

the end, it was the rats themselves that had proven me right. “Yes, you were right about the rats. What is it *this* time?”

“There is something strange about the bunny show. I don’t think it was really for kids. Maybe it was something to do with the Cold War, I’m not sure. You ought to at least see a few of the episodes.” I went on to tell her about what I had found and how I had found it, but I kept the details vague. I still wanted to write my article *and* I still wanted her to need me as the contact on the story. Chances were that if I just gave her everything I had discovered including names of people involved, I would never see her again. I just wanted to keep hope alive.

We parted company with no second drink and no promise of another meeting. Just her requesting that I keep her posted if the story amounts to anything.

I went back home and had a second drink on my own and watched more BooJoo episodes. I was feeling pretty sorry for myself.

The weekend was spent mostly with my writing an overview of the show and listening to jazz records with Jerry. Jerry seemed to think I had a much better shot with Lauren than I did. “Of course she’s going to be into you. She’s a news woman and you’re news!”

“I’m yesterday’s news.”

“You’re good luck. The last time she interviewed you, she got promoted.”

“I think that’s why she agreed to get a drink with me, in case I’m onto something.”

Jerry subsided a bit. “So what *are* you onto?”

I was nowhere near sorting it all out. What I had told Lauren was just a wild guess to keep her interested. “All I have is a pile of information that doesn’t amount to much, but is really strange. The show was made by the military. You’ve seen the shows. It just seems really weird, like they’re code or something. I told Lauren that they might have been meant for the Russians to see, but I really have no idea. I’m going to see the head writer on Monday if you want to come with.”

“Don’t you have to work Monday?”

“Screw work.”

Hines’ office was a little hole-in-the-wall along a corridor long enough for the Pentagon. I knocked on the door and Jerry and I were admitted to an outer office by a very attractive young woman, a total babe from top to bottom. She shook both our hands and introduced herself as Marcia Shoenberg. My years of mumbling and toe shuffling when confronted by a pretty girl are something that I left behind in high school, or so I had thought, but this auburn-haired, deep-blue-eyed beauty took me by surprise. Is this the kind of girl that goes to engineering schools these days? She seemed a lot more physically fit that the average science type, if you know what I mean. Her effect on Jerry was about the same, but she politely pretended not to notice and pointed us to a door to meet with Doctor Hines.

We found Hines behind it at a desk tapping on a computer keyboard. He stood up and we introduced ourselves. “Professor Hines, I’m Jake Zimmer, I’m a writer. You may have seen my work in some local publications under the byline Jacob M. Zimmer. This is my friend Jerry Howard.”

“Please, call me Charley. A writer, you say. What are you writing about?” Hines looked to be in his mid sixties, but quite fit. He seemed like one of those guys that got out to run ten miles every morning. He had a full head of wavy steel gray hair and a nice strong handshake. He should have been in sales or politics, the kind of person that makes you want to like him. In a corner of the office, a five stringed banjo leaned against the wall. This was the guy alright.

“I have taken an interest in a project you worked on quite some time ago, the BooJoo show.” From the outer office came a gasp and a slight thump.

Charlie called out “You o.k., Marcia?”

“Just spilled some coffee, Professor Hines.” Came the reply through the door.

Charlie returned his attention to me. “The BooJoo show?!? That was a long time ago.”

“It was, but some people remember it fondly. I was hoping that you might be able to help me fill in some of the history of the show and your part in it.”

“It did so poorly in the ratings. I thought kids hated it, we only made fifteen episodes.” He seemed to be a bit uncomfortable. Perhaps he was embarrassed to have worked on such a piece of crap.

I don’t know about kids, but certain young adults were impressed by its offbeat and surrealistic aspects.” I made the universal “toke” gesture holding a tightly gripped thumb and forefinger to my lips and gave a little wink.

Charlie was hesitant but then relaxed a bit. “Right. We never really considered that demographic at the time. There isn’t really too much to tell. It was early in my career and the extra income from writing was helpful. Even at big prestigious universities, assistant professors, which is what I was at the time, don’t get paid a lot.”

“The tone of the show was a little peculiar, military men as guests and so forth.”

“Yes, that must seem strange. The show was made with kids in families living on military bases in mind. We just didn’t continue with it long enough for it to be used that way. The Air force cut off funding.”

“I don’t suppose you have anything like production stills or scripts around.”

“All that stuff is long gone. The project didn’t amount to anything. No one thought that stuff was important.”

I was disappointed that there wasn’t more to it. It didn’t seem that I could get a good article out of this. It just went nowhere. Jerry and I said goodbye to Charlie and indulged in another long look at Marcia on the way out.

There was a message on the machine from Michelle, my boss when I got home.

She expressed hopes that I was feeling better and would be able to come into the office the next day. I guess that no one can write catalog copy quite like me. I figured that I might as well go in, chasing this story was getting me nowhere.

I was having a beer and watching Leno when my doorbell rang. I liked the fact that my basement apartment had a totally private entrance, but the downside of that was that no one had to call up and be buzzed in. they can just walk up to my door. Stupidly, I didn't even look through the peephole, I just swung open the door. Standing there was a Military man with stars on his shoulders, I wasn't even sure what service, accompanied by two helmeted MPs. I don't think the military police have jurisdiction in civilian neighborhoods, but something in their general manner led me to believe that they didn't care.

The man with the stars brushed past me to enter my pad uninvited followed by the MPs. "Are you Jacob Zimmer?" Asked the uniform. He looked contemptuously around my small apartment filled with old paperbacks, even older records and decorated with various toys including an old type-case hanging on the wall with a different '60's era Cracker-Jack prize in each tiny compartment.

"Who's asking?"

"I am General John Iverson, USAF." Iverson! It was the young captain from the first BooJoo show some thirty years older!

"Why are you here?"

"Are you Jacob Zimmer?" He repeated impatiently.

"That's what it says on my driver's license."

"Rest assured, Mister Zimmer, that this is *not* an occasion that calls for levity. It has come to our attention that you have in your possession materials belonging to the United States Air Force. These items must be returned to us immediately."

I wondered how dumb I could get away with playing this. "What items do you think I have?"

Iverson said. "Feigning ignorance won't help you at all." Well, that answered that. "You know to which items we are referring and we know that you have them. The tapes please."

"Those tapes are the property of WMUY."

"They have classified content that is property of the Air Force." It just wasn't that important. I gave them the tapes. They asked if I had duplicated any of the material and warned me not to talk about the content of the tapes or their visit to my house.

I called in sick again the next day. Michelle was somewhat pissed. She just said "Ihopeyoufeelbettersoon" All as one word and slammed the phone down. A couple more of these and my employment would be history. I wasn't so good at my job that I couldn't be easily replaced.

The next person I called was Charlie Hines. This time I got him on the phone

directly rather than the lovely Marcia. I made an appointment to see him that afternoon.

I called Jerry when he was just contemplating getting out of bed and asked him to come visit Charlie. I didn’t say it to him, but I thought I might need a witness. “Will Marcia be there?”, he inquired archly.

To Jerry’s visible disappointment, Marcia wasn’t there when we arrived, but Charlie showed us both right into his office. You sounded upset on the phone, Jake. What’s up?”

"I had a visitor last night, Charlie."

"A visitor?"

"General Iverson. He took my BooJoo tapes."

"Iverson!" Hines sat back looking deflated. "This could be bad. Maybe I shouldn't have talked to you about the show. I thought you'd look at them and would think it was a worthless subject and that would be the end of it."

"It would have been. The show sucks. No offense."

"None taken. That was the intent. We didn't want anyone to watch."

"Huh?"

"We needed the channel, but we didn't want a big audience. No audience at all would have been ideal, but we knew someone would watch."

"Kids."

"Yeah, kids. We assumed mostly because a parent made them. The show was nonviolent and that would be a selling point for some parents. We didn't think any kid would watch more than one episode on their own."

"This is kind of opposite of a standard marketing strategy."

"True. Getting viewers was not our concern. Even the commercials weren’t the type you see in kid’s programming. They were calculated to be unexciting to children.”

"I don't get it."

"Look, My time and availability might be limited. Iverson knows that you have seen some of the tapes. I wonder how he found out you had them. I hate to say it, but you should make some notes, tell some people. There is no telling what might happen.”

"Get serious! Over a kids show?"

"It was a front! Don't you get it?"

"A front? For what?" I just didn't see where he was going, how could I have?

Hines shook his head. "It's a long, complicated story, but it begins with my work. I might have had the Nobel prize! The Air Force suppressed me. The greater part of my work is classified Top Secret and can't be published."

"What does this have to do with the show?"

Hines looked at me hard. I think he wanted to get an idea of my character before

he went on. "In 1972, I was a civilian employee of the Air Force. My graduate studies had been in vibrational physics some of which had been directed at making objects x-ray or RADAR transparent or even invisible. The Air Force hired me and classified the work, but I was given a large staff and a well-equipped lab in which I was expected to work out practical applications. At the time, it seemed like the perfect deal. One of the systems my lab came up with had an unexpected result. An attempt to rotate the atoms of a steel sphere to make it transparent opened an aperture to Moof."

"Moof?" I recognized the odd name as one of the nonsense words from the BooJoo songs.

"Moof is a planet that exists in an alternate universe, a spacetime continuum parallel to our own. It actually is Earth, but our timelines divided before the cosmic collision that caused the formation of the Moon. For Moof, that event never occurred.”

“Alternate universe? Like in ‘string theory’?”

Charlie lit up a little. “Yes! Like in string theory! Moof is somewhat larger than Earth with a higher gravity, denser atmosphere, deeper oceans and different geology. It is the home of the Bujus."”

"Like BooJoo the bunny? Charlie, this all sounds pretty nuts."

"Hear me out. The Bujus are nothing like ‘bunnies’ and certainly nothing like humans. They have distinct differences in the structure of their DNA and proteins. Unlike Earth, the inhabitants of this world are not divided into living kingdoms of plants and animals. There are indeed life forms that spend their entire lives rooted to one spot living on solar energy and soil minerals and there are many that spend the majority of their lives free roaming. All land life forms spend at least some part of their existence rooted in the soil although for many it is only in their larval stage."

I couldn't believe I was actually hearing this stuff.

"A team stepped over onto the surface of Moof. In space suits mostly to protect from possible infection from Moofian microbes and for temperature control because Moof is considerably warmer than Earth. That is when we met the bujus."

"Pink bunnies?"

Charley curled his lip. "As I said, the bujus are *not* bunnies. Let me show you something." He pulled a three ring binder off a shelf and opened it showing me a photograph. It was taken in a strange landscape of low mounds and pools of water. The mounds were covered in what seemed to be vegetation all in shades of red, yellow and orange with only occasional patches of green and brown. In the center of the photo was something that was hard for my brain to put together. It was mostly pink and stood on two legs with a bent over torso. Between the legs was a mass of tentacles and a large spongy ovoid mass. The upper body had two

branches that ended in beak-like structures surrounded by more tentacles. Between the two branches was a hump with two more branches growing from it. These smaller branches had no beaks or tentacles. On the hump was a tightly puckered orifice that brought up obvious connotations in the human mind. "That is a buju. The bujus live in the meadows, which are hummocked lowlands where they raise their young like a farmer raises a crop. The continents of Moof are dotted with these areas that are the buju analog of nations."

"Wait….so is BooJoo a buju?"

"He was."

I sat there sputtering for a few seconds before I was able to formulate another sensible question. "Why?"

"The bujus are warlike and industrially advanced. They figured out where we came from and applied themselves to figuring out how to get here. The bujus do not have personal names. They refer to themselves as 'this buju', *bujutha* in their language. Their friendly greeting for one another is 'this buju makes no war', *bujutha hapibuni*. Within individual meadows, the bujus live at peace, but they are vehemently racist toward the denizens of other meadows. A meadow is by definition at war with all other meadows. The most common buju threat is 'We will dance in your meadows' which is meant to imply that they will stomp on the rooted young of their enemy and take possession of the lands for their own use. The bujus of the meadow we visited decided that they wanted to dance in our meadows."

"This is so weird! How does this lead to a crappy kids show?"

"I'm getting there. Since the bujus considered themselves to be at war with us, we had no issue with capturing a few bujus and taking them back to Earth for interrogation. We learned the buju language and a general outline of buju culture and history and buju anatomy. You have no idea what we might have been facing if the bujus were to invade Earth. They have almost no localized vital organs. A single bullet cannot kill or even slow down a buju. A machine gun can cut one down, but blowing pieces off of them is dangerous as the broken off pieces of flesh can take root and grow into new bujus. We are militarily more advanced than they are and would ultimately prevail, but the damage would be incalculable."

"Invaders from another dimension?" Even if this man was a screwball, and I had little doubt at that moment that he was, I had a fantastic story here. The only problem was the visit from Iverson which made it seem a bit plausible. "Why did you tell Iverson I had those tapes?"

"I didn't. I have no idea how he found out."

That was the moment the office door swung open. Jerry's face sprouted a dazzling smile. "Hi Marcia!", He said.

"Shut the fuck up.", She replied as she closed the door behind her. She looked over at Hines. "You really had no idea? That doesn't give much credit to all those

people who call you a genius."

Charlie gave Marcia a peevish glance. "Marcia, If you have a problem, we can discuss it later. I'm in a meeting here…"

Marcia cut him off. "I don't work for *you*, I'm with Air Force Intelligence. I'm *Captain* Marcia Schoenberg, and I have been assigned to you for the last nine months. Ever since the project ended, *someone* you work closely with has been keeping an eye on you. General Iverson had your personality pretty well figured out. He assumed that you would blab the whole thing sooner or later."

"So, you're the one who told the Air Force?" I asked lamely.

"I *am* the Air Force. Try to keep up."

"I knew she didn't look like an engineer.", I muttered under my breath.

Marcia tossed her perfect locks and said, "You all need to come with me." To ensure that there was no disagreement, she produced an automatic pistol from behind her back. "Let's go to your car, Charlie."

Still stunned by the unexpected turn of events, we were all pretty easy to march down to the lot and into the car. She put Charlie behind the wheel and set me riding shotgun. Jerry was behind Hines and Marcia was behind me keeping the gun on all of us. "You know the way, Charlie. Drive."

It was a quick shot down Massachusetts Avenue into Roxbury in the industrial district just beyond the hospital. There is an ice warehouse down there that I used to see from a distance everyday when I worked in Boston years ago. At least it said it was an ice warehouse on the outside and I had always believed it.

Marcia inserted a card key into a slot by a painted metal door and it opened into a space where a single uniformed man sat at a desk before a much larger and higher tech looking door. When he saw Marcia, he stood up and saluted. "At ease, lieutenant, I need to see the general right away."

"Yes Ma'am." He pressed a button on the desk and the huge metal door slid silently aside.

Marcia gestured to us with the automatic and we went through ahead of her. We were in a football field sized room full of office cubicles and each cubicle contained a busily working man or woman, most in uniform. To the sides of the packed office floor were glass walled offices and meeting rooms. Over far away in the direction that Marcia had us headed, one of the rooms contained something really weird. Jerry was the first to spot them. "Bujus!" He pointed a quivering finger.

In the glass enclosure were a half dozen bujus milling around. Seeing one alive was a very different experience from seeing the photo, which, up to this second I had half believed was a fake. I could now see that the mass of tentacles between the legs surrounded a wet, slot-like opening lined with spiky teeth. It looked like the ultimate misogynist's vision of a vagina. The part of the body with the "bunny

ears" that I has assumed was the head, would occasionally bend down and squeeze out yellowish lumps on the floor. That puckered orifice was exactly what it looked like. Now and then one of them would assume a posture with the bunny ear end straight up and briefly the outline of BooJoo the Happy Bunny could be seen.

"Lower your weapon, Captain." Iverson was standing in front of us. Marcia stuck the pistol into the belt of her jeans and saluted.

I said, "General I'd like to see a lawyer."

The General smiled. "This is not a legally formal situation. You are not under arrest. You are being detained as a matter of national security." Before I could ask any other questions, he looked at Hines. "Doctor Hines, you have really disappointed me. Even when this man had the tapes, he hadn't put the pieces together and when we took them back, that shouldn't have been a signal to you to fill in the blanks. I don't understand how such a smart man can be so *stupid*. I have to go over this situation carefully to decide what we're going to do next." A pair of MPs escorted us to a room and locked us in. It looked like a conference room with a single long table surrounded with chairs and a water cooler in one corner. There was a phone on the wall that had been disconnected and my cell couldn't find service in there. There was a whiteboard with markers near the head of the conference table. Hines sat down looking pretty deflated. Jerry still looked scared.

Charley said, "They are going to charge me with treason."

"Treason?"

"We're at war."

"Charley, I just don't get it. Why put a buju on TV if it's such a big hairy secret?"

"We needed to show them we were stronger than them to convince them that it wasn't worth their while to attack us. Communication with Moof by opening the dimensional doorway took too much power to do often, but we discovered that one range of television frequency possessed a, how do I express it to a layman…'common vibration', that could be utilized to reach the bujus. They could pick up messages broadcast on that frequency. Unfortunately for us, so could most television sets because a local television station used the same frequency. We decided that it would be possible to hide our message in the context of a TV show. We thinly disguised a captured buju so that we could show it in a state of submission to us. We hid the creatures mouth parts and root stub with a big pair of blue shorts and its genital/manipulators with oven mitts. Facial features were attached to a plug inserted into the creature's excretory orifice. We composed the BooJoo songs that contained warnings and outright threats in the buju language and had people on the show that demonstrated our greater military, industrial and scientific power without actually giving any secrets away. We used the phrases 'Moof, woo' which means 'Moof in ruins' and 'flambadula' which means 'we will

dance in your meadows' frequently. The whole idea was to get them to rethink the idea of attacking us. It was a risky and far from perfect plan and we abandoned it after only a short run in favor of a satellite in orbit of Moof that we occasionally upload new propaganda messages to. So far, those messages have helped keep the bujus wary of us."

Jerry said, "That's just nuts."

"Maybe, but it has worked. There have been no attempts from their side to cross into our world and when we cross into theirs they only make threats from a distance. So far, our war with the bujus has remained a cold one."

I was still confused. "How were you able to get it on the air?"

"The Air Force simply bought the air time. No one was going to advertise on a piece of crap like the BooJoo show so we lifted local commercials from other parts of the country. We had adds for real estate agents in Kentucky and hair salons in Florida and of course, Air Force recruiting spots."

"Yeah, I remember thinking that the commercials were weird for a kid's show."

Jerry muttered, "Did I imagine it, or did one of them shit out of his face? It doesn't even have eyes."

"You didn't imagine it, but that's not its face." Hines stood up and started illustrating on the whiteboard. "The buju doesn't really have a front or back side and they move in any direction with equal comfort. It doesn't have a lot of localized organs. Circulation and respiration are handled by tubes that run throughout the entire body. The same goes for the brain, which is the entire decentralized neural network. The creature's entire surface is dotted with tiny light receptors, we call them *omatiddia*, by which they can assemble a very good visual image. The same goes for hearing, which is accomplished with hundreds of tiny sensors in the skin. The baggy structure on what looks like the creature's rump is the root body. If a buju has trouble finding food it can root into the ground for nourishment. That is how they start life, in fact rooted like a plant. No inhabitant of Moof is either a plant or an animal. Those designations have no meaning there and they are different from life on Earth at the cellular and even molecular level. The two arm-like bracts end in a bunch of manipulatory tentacles, the number of which varies from individual to individual. Buried within this mass is what looks like a horny beak. This is the genital organ. The buju have two sexes that have been designated alpha and beta. Neither exactly corresponds to male or female. The organs are identical in both sexes although the betas have a smooth area around the cloacum that plays no role in mating. It may simply be a marking. The principal difference between the sexes is genetic. During mating one buju uses one of its genital beaks to nip a piece of flesh off of a buju of the opposite sex. This act can be performed by either sex. After mating, the beak is sealed shut and drops off within a few hours. The buju buries it in the ground where it takes root as a new

buju. Charlie was animated and enthusiastic as he lectured. This was his element.

I was slightly disgusted. “How does the other buju react to having a piece of it nipped off?”

“They don’t seem to have pain or pleasure in exactly the same way we do. Humans have kind of a neurological punishment and reward system. Bujus are less likely to be greatly disabled by a wound than a human and therefore seem to suffer less pain. They have only a few localized major organs, all are part of the digestive tract. They have no heart, lungs or central nervous system. They have no major bones and their muscles are usually individual cells attached directly to neurons and tiny hard lever organs. The levers are like bones, but none of them are more than a centimeter long and there are thousands and thousands of them in a buju body. That’s why a buju could look like a humanoid bunny, he can make his joints bend *anywhere*. If a small piece of flesh is removed, the buju suffers only slight distress. Bujus can also reproduce from same sex matings or a piece of flesh falling on the ground if they are injured, but a buju that grows from this kind of event is small, has a short lifespan and only animal level intelligence."

Joey asked, “What’s up with the ears?”

“Those are secondary bracts. When the buju is rooted early in life, they support a photochemical canopy sort of like leaves. They accumulate nutrients that they form from sunlight and soil chemicals. As they become engorged with these nutrients, they swell up and become less efficient so they die and fall off at which point, the young buju eats them. Shortly after the last one falls off, the young buju will uproot itself and become a mobile creature. After that, the auxiliary bracts simply contain a particularly high concentration of sensory cells.”

General Iverson entered the room with Marcia at his side. “My God, Charlie.”, he said, “You just can’t help yourself, can you?” He looked over at me and Jerry. “You gentlemen have committed no crime and I don’t think you can do us much harm. The existence of the bujus was revealed to no great effect in a supermarket tabloid a few years back, mostly due to lack of evidence beyond the story itself. Moving pictures of a living buju would provide that evidence therefore we are not going to allow you keep the videos of the BooJoo show. ”

“Aren’t you afraid we’re going to tell people about this?”

“We’re virtually certain you will, but without proof, it’s harmless. Just another UFO or Bigfoot story.”

We were led out, this time not at gunpoint. We were taken past the enclosure that contained the bujus and I paused before the barred door. One of the creatures approached, it looked like it was backing toward me, but I remembered that they did not have a preferred facing direction. Hell, they don’t have faces. It said “Bujutha hapibuni” In a clear voice although I couldn’t quite figure out how the voice was produced or what part of the creature’s body it came from. There was a

plethora of odd smells coming from the enclosure, neither good nor bad, but all odd. It reached toward me through the bars with one of its 'bracts' and I felt it touch me just as I was roughly pulled away by Marcia.

She held me tight against herself for a split second before releasing me. Man, she *really* smelled great. "Those things are dangerous!", She said. "Don't ever let one touch you."

I looked back at the buju. "Bujutha hapibuni!", it said again.

"Shut up!", Snapped Marcia and she quickly lead me away. I was about to say something, but thought better of it at the last second.

Charley drove us back to where our car was parked apologizing for getting us into this the entire time.

Jerry was a bit more freaked out than I was. He was talking about suing the Air Force. I didn't think that would be such a swift idea. The Air Force would just keep throwing lawyers at him until he gave up or was dead, whichever came first. "This isn't just rats!" He kept exclaiming.

I reached to my breast pocket for my sunglasses and they clicked against something. There was something round and hard in my pocket. I pulled it out. It was about the size of a pinball, but looked like swirly, horn-colored plastic. There was ridge that ran around its entire diameter in a zig-zag pattern. I held it up for Charley to see and said, "What the hell is this?"

He jerked the wheel hard and suddenly other drivers were honking at us. "Holy Jesus!"

"Shit! Will you be careful?! You're gonna get us fucking killed!"

He straightened out the car and pulled over. "That is a buju egg!"

"Egg?"

"Egg or seed. We have never really been able to decide which it's more like. We call it a "segg." That buju must have given it to you when it touched you."

"My God, why would it do that?"

"It probably assumed you would plant it. That must have been a pretty ignorant buju. I doubt it could grow and be healthy on Earth. The soil is all wrong and the food here lacks all kinds of nutrients that a growing buju would need."

"That's it!", Said Jerry.

"What?"

"Proof! You show that to the right scientist and they'll know it's not from Earth!"

"Charlie," I asked, "How long will this thing keep?"

"A while. A few months."

"Could we grow a buju if we supplied the soil with the right chemicals? Could we make foods it could eat? Having a genuine living alien would be pretty convincing stuff!"

"You don't understand! Earth doesn't even have the right atmosphere for a buju.

Not enough oxygen and too little carbon dioxide and the air pressure is way too low. The Trace elements in the soil are out of balance for them. A buju on Earth is like a human being at the top of Mount Everest. A buju on Earth is faint and disoriented most of the time. While most bacteria and viruses won't effect them, some Earthly molds and funguses will be virulent diseases for them. A buju couldn't grow up healthy on Earth."

"Look, you have the resources of MIT. Can't we come up with something?"

"You're just assuming that I agree with you that the existence of the bujus need to be made public and I'm not sure that I do."

"C'mon, man, the whole theory of our government is that things take place with informed consent, Gulf II, Viet Nam and the Spanish American war notwithstanding."

"Jake, this is way, way beyond politics!"

"There is a *war* on and the people of the USA don't know about it! Does the president even know?"

"The other branches of the military don't even know, only the portion of the Air Force under command of General Iverson and some select academics. Iverson took autocratic control after Colonel Johns had his heart attack. That was four presidents ago. Iverson is running his own war with his own people without oversight."

I've always been a mix-it-up guy. The battle attracts me as much as the cause. This guy running his own little war with an alternate universe needed some public scrutiny.

"Charlie, these guys have screwed up your whole professional life! You discovered a way to contact alternate universes and the Air Force took that discovery away from you! How have you sat there and done nothing about it all these years?"

"It's not that simple! I'm a patriotic American! The Air Force needs to protect the people of this nation!"

"From harm, but not from knowledge. You're a teacher. How does it make you feel suppressing information?"

"I'm already in a lot of trouble."

"They can't touch you without making the reason why public, or if you have made the reason why public first."

"What do you have in mind?" Asked Hines.

"You know how to open up a passage to Moof."

"And you are completely insane."

Building 34 at MIT is believed by members of the public who are curious about such things, to house an outmoded gravitational antenna laboratory that has not been used in about ten years. Charlie had a key and let us in. The room was

cluttered with a number of bulky old DOS computers on desks that surrounded a sort of thrown together looking piece of apparatus. There were big coils of heavy copper wire and a number of large vacuum tubes. There was at the center a steel sphere about three times the size of a bowling ball with a few light spots of rust on the surface just resting sort of off center on an old wooden office desk surrounded by a ring of five coils. There were heavy electric cables snaking all over the floor. All of the coils and cables had yellowed paper stickers on them with numbers written in felt tip pen. “This is where it first happened.” Said Charlie.

I called Lauren Vrabec on my cell phone and told her to get down there with a cameraman. Things were about to get interesting. He clicked a switch on one of the cables and booted up the computers. “Wait until the news people get here!” I said.

Hines had taken on a distracted look, like he was barely there, as if he thought he was dreaming all of this. “It will take a little while for stuff to warm up.” He all but mumbled. The steel sphere started to levitate off the desk and centered itself between the coils. It started to rotate very slowly. I followed one rust spot as it turned and figured that it took a little under a minute to make its first rotation and about a second less for the second rotation. It was accelerating.

Lauren showed up when the sphere was spinning about five times a minute with a sweaty fat guy named Marty in tow. Marty had a big news camcorder with a mike plugged into it that Lauren was holding. “What is this?” She asked me, “I thought you were tracking down a children’s show from the ‘70’s.”

“And this is where it lead me. Just watch and get this all on tape.”

The sphere was now spinning at a pretty good clip and the large vacuum tubes were glowing brightly.

Hines made a few adjustments in the computer control of the coils and suddenly the steel sphere seemed to triple in size and take on the appearance of rippling water. I have no idea how fast it was now rotating or even if it was still rotating at all. It seemed more like a floating membrane. Charlie tapped a few keys and suddenly the ripples smoothed out and we had a clear view into…somewhere. Rust colored hills and ponds of dark water, bizarre looking trees. A fairly strong wind was blowing outward from the strange phenomenon and it carried with it a riot of alien odors. "This is the planet Moof.", said Charlie.

Lauren walked a little closer, her eyes wide. "This is amazing! Another planet in a hole in the air?" She looked at me. "Jake, what does this have to do with…what was it, 'BooJoo the Happy Bunny'?"

As if on cue a pair of "ears" popped up over a nearby rock visible in the hole in space. "Bujutha hapibuni!" came a strange voice.

A broad smile bloomed on Lauren's face. Oh God, she thought it was cute! That lasted slightly less than one second as the rest of the creature reared up from behind the rock, its toothed, slot-like mouth dripping, tentacles waving and looking

for all the world like some sort of Lovecraftian nightmare. Lauren screamed. This wasn't just a little yelp of surprise, uh-uh, this would have done Fay Wray proud! She dropped her microphone and scooted behind Marty who dutifully kept taping and sweating.

I know that it was a pretty alarming sight, God knows *I* was alarmed, but I just figured that an experienced newswoman would have a bit more gumption. I said "Maybe you ought to shut it down for a minute, Charlie."

"Have we got enough footage?"

Before anyone could answer him, the buju leapt through the hole with an amazing display of agility. And landed right in front of Marty. Marty just took a couple of steps back but held the camera rock steady. This guy was one-hundred percent professional. Lauren abandoned him and fled to a far corner of the room. The buju swatted the camera out of Marty's hands with one of its bracts. Maybe it thought it was a weapon.

"Charlie!, Shut it down!" I hollered.

"Another fine mess!" Snarled Jerry in my direction.

"I didn't make you come! You wanted to see that chick."

The buju suddenly rushed at Charlie before he could tap anymore keys and knocked him over. In less time than it takes to tell it five more bujus appeared in the hole and jumped through. I was belatedly starting to wonder if things were getting out of control. Jerry had already decided and grabbed me by the collar dragging me toward the door. We slammed the door behind us just in time to see an olive drab truck pull up at the door of building 34. Marcia, now in uniform, jumped out with a pistol in hand followed by Iverson and six MP's. They seemed to mean business.

Marcia pointed the gun at us and demanded, "What's going on in there?"

"Hi Marcia!", said Jerry brightly.

Marcia looked him dead in the eye and smiled sweetly. "What was your name again?"

Jerry blushed slightly. "It's Jerry!” he said.

"Shut the fuck up, *Jerry*."

The door behind us suddenly burst open and Lauren, Marty and Charlie came running out as fast as they could. They just pushed past everyone including the MP's totally ignoring their orders to halt. The reason why became apparent less than a second later when dozens of bujus poured through the doors. This time I grabbed Jerry and ran toward the news van after Lauren, Marty (who was still attempting to tape the goings on) and Charlie who was just following them. I saw Marcia empty her pistol into a buju before it knocked it out of her hand, and ran off.

As the news van peeled out the MP's raised pistols at us but Iverson signaled

them to stand down. He probably figured that it wouldn't be such a good idea for the Air Force to be shooting at the news media on a public street.

It was Lauren who had taken the wheel and she was holding on with a vise grip. Tendons stood out on the back of her hands like mountains on a relief map. Marty was shouting at her. "Slow down! Where the hell are you going? The story is over there!"

She stomped on the brake just outside of the parking lot throwing random bits of equipment around the back of the van where Jerry, Charlie and I were trying to hang on for dear life. She whipped around and stared at me with wide eyes. "What was that? What are those monsters?" She looked like she was about to burst into tears or burst out laughing, I wasn't sure which.

"Those are bujus.” Said Charlie.

I looked at Lauren. "I was going to explain. They were what the Air Force was trying to cover up with the BooJoo show."

"That doesn't make any sense!"

Charlie said, "I know. They know. It didn't last long."

"Just long enough to get a few people interested." Said Jerry.

I looked back toward the parking lot where the bujus were now charging about as the MP's took occasional shots at them. None of the bujus were brought down by the gunfire although one of them was left limping. More bujus were still dribbling out of the door of the lab building and it looked like there were now about fifty of them.

As the general and Marcia talked frantically on cell phones, the bujus started moving as a group toward Massachusetts avenue and Central Square.

"Hey!", I said, "They're making for Central Square!"

"There is something like a thousand people up there!" Cried Lauren.

"This ought to be good!" Chuckled Marty. "Get on the gas, lady. We gotta head 'em off and get the shot!"

Lauren finally seemed to get it together at that point. "Right, get the shot. Lets go." She hit the gas and Marty climbed into the back and started taping the horde of bujus as they followed us.

I turned to Charlie. "How much damage can they do? They're unarmed, right?"

"I don't think they can do that much. They are about as strong as a man, so I suppose they can beat people up. They are certainly going to scare the pants off of a lot of folks."

"Aren't they going to just keep coming through that hole in space?"

"No. The bridge decays after a few minutes. If it isn't closed already, it will be soon."

Just as we came down to the near end of the Square, some of the bujus paused to stomp on some decorative plants in front of the firehouse, the Shaw's market and

the Salvation Army. We could hear that they were shouting the word "flambadula" over and over again. "They think the plants are our young." Said Charlie.

"Wow! I guess they're really out fix our wagon." I said. "Can we stop by the Seven Eleven so I can get some smokes?" Every one in the van just looked at me in silence.

"Maybe later." Said Jerry caustically.

A tight knot of bujus swarmed up the middle of Massachusetts avenue and cars were swerving to get out of their way. One got hit by a Dudley bus but stood right back up with one of its bracts hanging loosely and quickly rejoined the pack. "Tough little bastards." Said Marty.

"No centralized organs." Said Charley. "They can take a lot of punishment and keep on going."

I said to Charlie. "I thought you said the air is bad for them on Earth."

"It is. They will all be dead within a day if we can't get them back through to Moof."

Lauren pulled to a stop right near a liquor store because most of the bujus had stopped and were stomping on whatever plants there were, flowers, grass or even weeds sticking up through the pavement. "What the hell are they doing?" She asked.

"They think they're killing our children. They start their lives like plants and they assume that we do too."

"Why?"

"Because we are at war, only no one knows it but Iverson and his cronies."

"War!" Lauren was appalled but there was a little twinkle in her eye that I didn't like. I think it was the vision of a Pulitzer prize or whatever hell they give local television journalists. No matter what it was, she was a little jazzed now. Lauren smoothed her hair and snapped at Marty, "Get us ready for a stand-up in thirty seconds! Call in for a special report!" She jumped out of the van followed by Marty with his camera, tripod and a half mile of cable.

The bujus were still a ways down the block, but they were starting to spread out. I was afraid that some of them might have already made their way down side streets doing God-knows-what. Even so, I dodged into the liquor store for a pack of Chesterfields. If I was going to watch a war in Central Square, I was damn well going to have a cigarette while it happened.

I don't want to sound like I didn't care, but these bujus just didn't look like much of a threat, and this is from a guy who worries about lab rats. When I came out I had to swiftly revise that opinion. Just as I emerged from the liquor store I found myself face to (more or less) face with a buju who waved its bracts at me aggressively. "Bujuthahapibuni!", I shouted at it.

The critter froze in its tracks with only its tentacles slowly waving for a second

then it ran off without the benefit of turning around. I have no idea what it must have thought.

All traffic had stopped and a bunch of bujus had turned over a car that had honked at then and were jumping up and down on it while the driver fled in terror. Things were getting a little more out of hand than I had predicted.

Some of the bujus were chasing people around and there was a lot of shouting. That's when a trio of hummers came up from the direction of Harvard Square. One of them had a machine gun mounted on it. The air was suddenly filled with the shrill cry of sirens. Oh shit. This was not good. The square was starting to fill up with cops who were moving people along and occasionally using batons on bujus.

"Maybe we ought to split." Said Jerry as he gently tugged on my sleeve. "They got the big guns."

I nodded my head as I lit a butt. "Yeah. A little out of our depth here." We turned to mosey down a side street when we came face to face with Marcia who, of course, had a gun pointed at us. "Oh hell! You know, you are not nearly as charming as you seemed."

"It's my cross to bear. You guys aren't going anywhere."

"Why not? We don't know anything that everyone else won't within a couple of hours."

"I'm going to have you charged with treason. We are at war!"

"A war the president doesn't even know about!"

At that moment Iverson showed up. He put his hand on Marcia's shoulder. "Stand down, Captain." He said. "These gentlemen are free to go."

“But…”

“Now, Captain.”

There were suddenly a *lot* of military guys in Central Square. Lauren was a ways up the street doing a stand-up special report with her intense investigative reporter face on. Charlie was standing next to her with a pained expression answering questions. Bujus were still running around intoning the word "flambadula" over and over again while stamping on every plant they could find, but one by one they were being captured, restrained and tossed into the back of a truck.

Iverson ordered Marcia to get lost. Marcia glared at us for a second, then turned and marched off. Jerry was staring at her bottom as she went. The General drew me and Jerry aside. "You gentleman are in an interesting position. I only hope you're smart enough to make the most of it."

I eyed him suspiciously. "How do you mean?"

"You have become less important to us now that the existence of our conflict with the bujus is going to have to become general knowledge."

"You mean you're not going to just seal off the whole area?" I asked.

"No. Because of her," He motioned toward Lauren, "we could never pull it off.

There are also all these people with cell-phone cameras. We just couldn't keep a lid on the story."

"So where does that leave us?"

"The rest of the government and the public will now be in the loop, which is going to make handling this problem a lot more difficult. I expect action to slow to a crawl. Assuming that I don't have to face major discipline, I expect to remain in charge, though. I'm hoping that you know better than to portray our actions in a bad light. I'm a much better friend than an enemy. You gentlemen are free to go."

We split back for Jerry's apartment where we had a couple of drinks and watched Lauren on TV. By early evening, the military guys had rounded up most of the bujus. A few had been killed and I'm guessing that a few more ended up in detention in Roxbury, but they showed on the news a clip of many of them being sent back through to Moof at a large transport doorway that I presume was also at the Roxbury facility. Two or three were unaccounted for but would be dead from either the toxic effects of our atmosphere or lack of nutrition in a short time.

That bit from Iverson about assuming he didn’t have to face major discipline struck me as one hell of an assumption, but sure enough, he wasn’t court-martialed and remained in charge of keeping the Bujus in check.

Everyone knows that this was a big story and made national news. It still bums me out that I never got any of the credit for breaking it. The president even talked about it mispronouncing all the technical words as he did. Thanks to a major hurricane that devastated the Gulf Coast, the story was all but gone after a few news cycles. A few internet sites and newsgroups sprung up about Moof and the bujus, but a lack of hard information had most of them descending into wild speculation almost from the start.

National Geographic did an article on Moof with lots of glossy color pictures, but most people only saw it as another exotic location, after all, it wasn’t *really* another planet but another version of Earth. The average news consumer saw it as yet another UFO story only the idea of UFO’s seemed more plausible than alternate Earths.

I started to write a book about it, but getting quotes and interviews seemed to be nearly impossible. Charlie Hines had been forced into retirement by MIT and didn't want to talk to me. He blamed me for ruining what was left of his career.

Lauren didn't return my calls, particularly after she got a job with the network co-hosting their popular morning show in New York. Last I heard, she was dating one of the New York Yankees.

Iverson just laughed at me when I actually got through to him. All he had to offer were the standard press releases. He wished me luck, but offered no help. “You're on your own, Zimmer.” He said. “If I were you, I would just be grateful that I was a free man.”

And (of course) I got fired from my job because Michelle saw me on TV after I had called in sick.

I had discovered the biggest story of the century and was left without a pot to piss in…unless…

I wasn't quite sure how to proceed so I just went out and got some potting soil, dry ice and an oxygen cylinder to start. I was going to have to trust my luck with adjusting the soil chemistry. I put the weird little “segg” thing in the soil and dribbled extra oxygen into a tent made from a laundry bag. I put a chunk of dry ice on a dish next to the pot inside the tent to get the CO_2 level up a bit. About a week later, a pink bulbous mass had appeared with a fat orange leaf like thing. I’m going to name him Bunny.

3
Why Me?

The new "chapter" of Aviators of Tomorrow for the Boston BIG IDEA just flowed out of my fingers onto the computer screen.

****

Chapter 3
Taking Action

After the airliners started falling from the sky throughout Europe, Colonel Rawlings thought it was a good idea to make his way to headquarters as swiftly as the autogyro could carry him. That was the place to start, he was certain of that.

The young Aviators of Tomorrow kept their European base of operations in a network of tunnels within the Rock of Gibraltar. As he sped over southern Spain, Rawlings spotted yet another downed Zeppelin. With a quick and practiced hand on the cockpit telegraph key, he inquired as to the well being of the survivors. Receiving a confirmation that they had already been assured of their impending rescue, the colonel continued onward.

It wasn't long before the monolith of the Pillars of Hercules appeared on the horizon. He signaled ahead and the upper tip of the rock slid soundlessly aside to reveal Rawlings' personal gyropad. The rotors spun him down to a perfect landing.

Standing close at hand was Flight Lieutenant Johnny Ames, the tow-headed Indiana farm boy who at the age of thirteen was the finest pilot of his age on this or any other planet! "Colonel Rawlings!", he called out in greeting. Rawlings climbed out of the cockpit and shook Johnny's hand warmly. "What's going on, Sir? I heard about the falling Zeppelins, what could be causing it?"

"Johnny, I'm afraid we have a grave problem on our hands here." Said Rawlings.

"Grave?"

"I won't mince words Lieutenant, it may be the greatest challenge we have ever faced!"

Blood drained from the youngster's face. "You mean greater than the invasion of the Lunar Spider People?"[1]

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

1. As told of in Aviators of Tomorrow book #1, *The Adventures of the Young Aviators of Tomorrow*.

"Worse than the maniacal machinations of the Magnet Master?"[2]

"Worse than that."

"More alarming than the super-storms of the Chinese Weather Wizard?"[3]

"Oh my, far more serious than even that!"

"Gosh!"

Rawlings stooped a little to bring himself eye to eye with the youthful flyer and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Don't you worry, Johnny, Don't you worry! Has there ever been a challenge too great for the Aviators of Tomorrow to meet and conquer?"

The boy lifted his chin and shot the cuffs of his smart uniform. "Never!" he exclaimed.

Rawlings nodded sagely. "That's right, Johnny, never." With that, the pair turned and walked into bowels of the labyrinthine headquarters.

Within minutes a meeting of the entire Aviators of Tomorrow corps was underway in the super scientific situation room. As well as Johnny and the Colonel, in attendance were Tex, Morris, Smilin' Brady, Betsy, Eveready Rob, Newton and Norton the twins, Milo and, of course, Martian Bobbi.

Colonel Rawlings removed a glass slide from his pouch and inserted it into the projector where it threw a map of Europe on the screen. In several places there were red marks. Rawlings said "Each mark represents the location of an airship that has crashed within the last three weeks. The heads of the pan-European Aero-Defense Command believe these not to be mere accidents, but the result of villainy utilizing super-science!"

Almost in perfect synchronization, the young Aviators of Tomorrow said "Gosh!", of course with the exception of Martian Bobbi who said "Bobbi!"

The Colonel continued "There is evidence, based on the work of Professor Caldwell of Yale University, that these crashes are the result of applied gravity control!"

"But that's impossible!" Cried Betsy. "Even with super-science, no one has ever been able to control gravity!"

"If only it were so, Betsy. Worse yet, Professor Caldwell has disappeared. We suspect that he may have been kidnapped. This leaves us without the expertise of the only person who would have any chance of understanding this diabolical phenomenon. This may well be the worst situation we have ever faced!"

Tex stood up. "Now wait thar just a stretch, Colonel, yew mean that it's worse than the Mystery Robots thet attacked Paris?"[4]

"Oh yes, Tex, far worse than that!"

2. Who's story is related in Aviators of Tomorrow book # 12, *The Aviators of Tomorrow face the Magnetic Monster.*

3. The tale of which is rousingly recounted in Aviators of Tomorrow book # 4, *The Aviators of Tomorrow against the Ill Wind from the East.*

4. Which the alert reader will recall from Aviators of Tomorrow book # 16, T*he Aviators of Tomorrow vs. The Metal Menace.*

Milo spoke up. "Surely not worse than the super cannons of the Bird Soldiers?"[5]
"I'm sorry, Milo, it is."

"Bobbi?" Inquired Martian Bobbi.[6]

"That was almost as great a challenge, Martian Bobbi, but this one is greater still."

The Aviators were indeed stymied by the seeming magnitude of the difficulty they now faced. Gravity control! Nature's most intractable force bent to the will of humanity, and the most callously criminal of humanity at that! The crashes had all been identical in nature as well as the subsequent robberies. Helm control would be lost in a luxury zeppelin that would then come slowly to earth in a remote area. The back of the ship would break as if under a great weight once it had touched down driving the crew and the passengers into the open. That is when the flying disc pirates would show up in their strange aeroplanes. These sky pirates spoke an unknown language, but there was no mistaking the coarseness of their character or the lewd tone of their comments. They were brutally thorough taking anything of value, money, jewelry, clothing as well as any stocks or bonds that the gentlemen aboard might have. In a matter of minutes the disabled ship was abandoned along with its occupants who were left only in their underclothes. In one of these incidents the chairman of one of America's most important textile concerns was relieved of some hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash. In another, the crown jewels of Belgium were stolen. Who could be behind these crimes?

Rawlings decided to take Johnny and Tex with him to seek the aid of the British Intelligence Service. Rawlings was owed a favor by the head of the Service, Sir Geoffrey Waddington-Smythe.[7] Sir Geoffrey had it in his power to make available all manner of exotic aircraft. The three got into the autogyro and instantly set off for London. Our intrepid heroes followed the coast until they reached the city of Lisbon and the headed northwest for the British isles and it was at that point in their journey that Tex cried out "Ya'll look!" The Colonel and Johnny both looked where Tex was pointing, exactly to their rear as it happened. They were being followed by one of the flying disc aeroplanes of the Sky Pirates!

"Man the rear guns, Johnny!" said Rawlings, "I'll see if I can shake them off our tail!"

Johnny crawled back to the gun bubble and strapped himself in. The gun was quite unusual and quite powerful being one of the *vibratotron* weapons captured from

5. The story of which can be found in Aviators of Tomorrow book # 8, *Aviators of Tomorrow- Curse of the Bird Men.*
6. Indeed, as you will recall from Aviators of Tomorrow book #5, *The Young Aviators of Tomorrow Journey to Mars*!
7. The nature of said favor is explained in gripping detail in Aviators of Tomorrow book # 19 *Aviators of Tomorrow- Desperate Days.*

Doctor Walter Crane, the notorious Earthquake Maker.[8] Johnny carefully set the complicated controls of the device to the narrowest focus possible and then pressed the activation key. The disc shaped craft started to vibrate but held its position. "Gosh, Colonel! It's staying in one piece! What could it be made of?"

"Try broadening the focus, Lieutenant, but be careful! Don't let the beam fall below the horizon!"

"Gosh, no!"

The broader beam was held steady on the pursuing aeroplane and the vibration became more pronounced. Finally, the aircraft pulled away, apparently without damage. Johnny asked, "How could they survive the vibratotron? No aircraft that we have or know how to build can last a second in that beam!"

Rawlings smiled. "At least, not without Martian Bobbi's help."[9]

"That's for sure, but what are we going to do about the disc ship?"

"There isn't much we can do with only the gear aboard the autogyro. We'll see how Sir Geoffrey can help."

British Sky command occupied a two-mile high skyscraper in the heart of London where all manner of aircraft could be seen coming and going from landing strips on its high parapets. The autogyro scooted into an opening about three quarters up the lofty structure.

They were met by Sir Geoffrey even before they had exited the aircraft. Sir Geoffrey energetically pumped Colonel Rawlings' hand and said, "By Jove! It's good to see you old man! Good to see you! When I got your message I was appalled at the statistics, appalled, I tell you! Think of it the rich and noble being victimized by the crass and lowly! Something must be done at once, we'll see to that!"

Sir Geoffrey spoke a little bit more quickly than Tex was used to. He asked, "Whut'sit he said?"

Johnny said. "He's glad we're here."

"Wail, he should've just *said* thet then!"

Sir Geoffrey led Rawlings and the two lads to his office where he saw to it that everyone was seated comfortably and supplied with a cup of hot tea. Johnny and the colonel sipped happily. Tex sniffed at his cup suspiciously and quietly put it aside.

Rawlings wasted no time getting to the point. "Sir Geoffrey," he said, "We face a most daunting challenge, perhaps the greatest we have ever faced!"

Sir Geoffrey gripped the arms of his chair and leaned forward. "Good Lord! I'm stunned, old man, truly stunned! Are you insisting that I believe

8. This amazing weapon's history is dynamically described in Aviators of Tomorrow book # 22, The Aviators of Tomorrow- The Man who Shook the World!

9. *ibid.*

that this is greater threat than that of the Cloud Army?"[10]

"It barely compares, Sir Geoffrey."

"Oh, *come now*, surely it cannot be greater than the Underground Empire!"[11]

"I'm compelled to say that it is!"

"Crikey!"

"Sir Geoffrey!"

"I'm sorry, please forgive the language old scout, but this is most distressing! Do you mean to tell me, that this exceeds the sheer, mind crushing horror of the Polar Demons?!?"[12]

"I beg that you attempt to calm down, Sir Geoffrey, but, yes, in fact it does!"

"Then I fear that this is beyond even the power of your brilliant young flyers! I believe that providence alone can aid us now!"

"But you haven't even heard what the problem *is* yet!"

"RIGHT! Righto. Well, perhaps you had best fill me in then!"

And Rawlings proceeded to tell Sir Geoffrey Waddington-Smythe of the sky pirates who seemed to control gravity and how even their most terrifying weapon failed to destroy one of their aircraft.

After the recitation, Sir Geoffrey sat and stroked his neat mustache and nodded his head slightly. "Perhaps...just *perhaps* mind you, the British Aeroforces may have something to help you!"

10. How the threat of the Cloud Army was overcome is illuminated in Aviators of Tomorrow book # 13, The *Aviators of Tomorrow and the Mystery at Fifty-Thousand Feet!*

11. The rise and fall of which is delineated in Aviators of Tomorrow book # 25, *Aviators of Tomorrow against the Underworld Dictator!*

12. The story of which unfolds in Aviators of Tomorrow book # 9, Aviators of Tomorrow- Peril at the Pole!

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This was one of my best, even if I did say so myself. I had worked myself into a position where I actually could call myself a professional writer. Granted, the bulk of my work was proofreading, catalog copy and random editorial crap for a local advertising group, but I did get the occasional short story published and I had a monthly spot in the BIG IDEA doing things like *Aviators*. I'm the first to admit that it's formulaic, hacky stuff dressed up to look like it's *parodying* formulaic, hacky stuff. It pays (sort of) and I seem to have trouble staying employed. I have now lost a couple of jobs for reasons that couldn't help but sound peculiar. The fact is that one had to do with intelligent rats and the other with invades from another dimension and those reasons were weird enough that the fact they were true hardly mattered. At the end of the day, facts merely annoy people.

I emailed the story over to Dave Beiderman, the editor and got a reply within a half hour, but it wasn't the reply I had expected.

Jake,

Please don't send me any more stuff like this. It's a little tired and you are starting to repeat yourself. I know you can do better. Do you have something else? If not, don't worry, I can give Eddy your spot this month while you work something up.

-Dave

That son-of-a-bitch. Was he calling me a hack? I can call myself a hack, but I'll be damned if I'll put up with it from some *editor*! I decided not to respond to the email and just go see him at the office. I was determined to give that smarmy fuck a piece of my mind.

I just had to get outside, anyway. Sometimes I just get sick of the odd smells in my apartment. That's because of Bunny, my "pet". Bunny needs a lot of special care. He (she? it?) is a buju, an intelligent being from another planet. Well, not really intelligent because he was bred wrong to attain high intelligence and then raised on Earth which left him odd and stunted due to lack of all kinds of chemicals that are simply not available here and an atmosphere that is too low pressure and has too little oxygen and CO_2 even though I took pains to try and supply those things when he was growing. Because of Bunny, I was able to give some well paid interviews about the bujus that got a lot of press, but it also kind of backfired because I was seen by some as cruel for having raised Bunny in this environment. After they are fully grown, bujus are supposed to be free living, but Bunny liked to return to his pot of soil at least once a day. I think there was some sort of nutrient he could only get from the soil or maybe he lacked some hormone that kept him from fully maturing, damned if I knew. Keeping him alive was costing me because I still kept the pot supplied with extra oxygen which isn't cheap.

Bunny could talk, not that he had much to say. He would just say "Breakfast, Jake" by which he meant any meal at any time of the day, or "I sleep now, Jake" or "Let's play, Jake." He couldn't tell the difference between different people's names so he called everyone by my name. He thought "Jake" was just some sort of generic name. Shortly after he uprooted himself for the first time, he methodically killed all of my houseplants for no apparent reason and did it again when I brought more into the house. I didn't try a third time.

Red meat and most vegetables seemed to frighten him. He would eat mushrooms and some fruits. He liked dry cat food, but it gave him a rash and made him smell even stranger than he already did. He mostly ate a mash of ground up fish, bones, scales and all, which I had to mix with cow manure that I got at the garden store or he wouldn't eat it. You can imagine how much trial and error when into discovering *that* magic ingredient. I had to remind myself he was an alien and that

somehow made it a little less gross. A little. He used to get crusty orange patches on his pink hide until I added extra Sulfur to his diet. Since no buju had ever lived on this planet, I was kind of playing it by ear.

As I headed for the door, Bunny jumped down off of the shelf where his pot was. He wasn't as big as a regular buju, only about two and a half feet tall, a dwarf. "Out, Jake?" he asked.

"I can't take you, buddy. People stare at you. Sleep in your pot, O.K.?"

"Jake, O.K!"

My car had finally died about two months before so I took the 86 bus into lower Allston, or as I called it "Darkest Allston", where the BIG IDEA office was.

In the 90's, the Union Square area of Allston was where numerous cheap apartments that housed students and various Bohemians could be readily found, but in the twenty-first century things were starting to change. Harvard and Boston University were tearing down older buildings and setting up new blocks that they owned and administrated strictly for their own student populations. Before too much longer, there wouldn't be anywhere in the Boston area for regular impoverished weirdoes to live. Even the BIG IDEA, which used to be a trashy tabloid with few adds that cost a buck now had a glossy cover, was free and was mostly adds. To me, the magazine was a perfect metaphor for Allston itself. On the upside, now they paid for articles rather than depended on writers whose only goal was to see their words in print.

Right where I got off of the bus was a Blanchard's liquor store where I could score some smokes. They had a three packs for the price of two deal on my brand. Nice. There was this old guy by the door. I can't say for sure exactly how old he was, but at least eighty. He smiled and waved at me and said "Hey there!"

I said "Howdy!" back to him and moved on, but he made an impression on me. He looked a little odd and somehow vaguely familiar. He was completely bald but had a huge bushy moustache. Nothing odd about the moustache, I have a huge bushy moustache too but mine is brown while his was completely white. He was wearing what looked like cargo pants, but they were cut wide and had large polka dots making them look a little like clown pants. He had a blue t-shirt with a weird pointy collar and sandals that looked like they were made of transparent plastic. "The circus must be in town." I thought to myself.

As I was walking out, he was still there by the door and said "Hey there!" again to me. I realized what made him look familiar. He bore a rather striking resemblance to my father, if my father were shorter, fatter, had a moustache and took fashion tips from Bozo.

I stopped this time. "What's up?" I thought he might be looking for a handout. I knocked a smoke out of the pack and extended it his way. He waived it off.

"No thanks! I kicked that habit long ago."

"So, you need some change?"
"Nope, I need to talk to you."
"Do I know you?"
"Nope, but I know who you are and I have something you need to see."
Now this actually happens to me fairly often. Because I have gotten a reputation for being involved with weird things, I attract "X-File" types who all think that I'm the one to publicize their particular obsession. Typically these people are artists, frauds, believe they are psychic or just plain nutjobs. Nonetheless, they sometimes gave me ideas for stories or inspired characters for stories. I had this guy sized up as some sort of crackpot and he didn't disappoint. "What have you got?"
"A time machine!" Jackpot! I figured that Dave would be in his office for at least another four hours and I had to see this! I asked his name and he told me to just call him "Jayzee."
I had had this one pegged for a water-into-gasoline pill, or perpetual motion machine guy. A time machine is way more out there. If he was one of the good ones, I was at least about to see a pretty nice magic trick. Of course he started hedging almost as soon as he made the claim. "So this thing can really travel through time?"
"Well, not in so many words. It can show you time from a different angle."
"Different angle?"
"You'll just have to see." Yeah. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
He took me to an old brick and wood garage just outside of Union Square. It looked like it hadn't been used for at least ten years. Inside it seemed bigger than it looked from the outside. There was something that looked like an amusement park ride, a huge jointed robot arm with a clear plexiglass capsule on the end with a seat-belted chair and some controls inside. Otherwise, the big room only contained some desks and a few computers. The computers were not anything that was familiar to me and I'm pretty wired. I didn't recognize much on their desktops.
The old guy smiled. "Ain't she something?"
"What is it?"
"That is how we can look at time from the outside! Time is not the fourth dimension or even the fifth or sixth. Time is not space, but it has some space-like qualities the most important of which is that it looks different when viewed from different directions. We see it the same way all the time and as a result barely realize that we see it at all. We are *imbedded* in it!"
"You're pulling my leg. Time doesn't have different directions."
"It's got *angles* buddy! Believe me, I've seen 'em!" The old man leaned forward and waggled his bushy white eyebrows in a Grouchoesque fashion. "Wanna see?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure." I assumed that he was going to show me something on the computer screen. Instead he pointed at the capsule on the end of the arm and said "Get in."

"Get in?!? What's that thing going to do?"

"It's so simple you won't believe it. The arm is equipped with gravimetric oscillators. It will simply move a payload a few degrees into one of the higher dimensions. It was originally built it to test some of the predictions of string theory."

"I don't know….."

"Oh ferchristssake, just get in. It's like a ride at Disneyworld."

"But…"

"You wanna see time from the side, right?"

"I'm afraid I'll blow chunks if I get in that thing."

"To be honest, you probably would if you had a few drinks, the sensation is pretty disorienting, but you ought to be o.k."

I got into the little capsule. It was open on both sides with no doors and there was a chair with a seat belt that resembled a bucket seat from an old car. There was a laptop computer bolted to a little platform in front of the seat with some obscure software running on it. There were also stereo speakers in the capsule and a control panel with two joysticks.

"This looks complicated." I said.

"Don't worry. I'll be operating it from my desk. You don't have to touch the controls at all. Just belt in, sit back and relax. I can hear you from the mike on the computer and you'll be able to hear me through the speakers."

"Can't you just talk to me normally?"

"Sound doesn't propagate well in that dimension."

"That dimension?"

"O.k. Brace yourself."

"How do I …..ooooooog…." Something just *wrong* happened to my stomach and I closed my eyes and did my best to hold down my breakfast even though the direction of *down* now seemed far less definite. I opened my eyes and things looked strange. The room looked like a bubble clinging to the arm that held the little pod that held me. About four feet behind the pod the arm entered the bubble that appeared to be around the size of a large beachball.

The voice of the old man came out of the speakers. "Are you alright?"

"I guess. What happened?"

"You have been rotated in a higher dimension so that you can see time as a quality of space."

"You never really did make that clear. Is time a kind of space or not?"

"Is light a particle or a wave?"

"I don't need riddles right now. I still think I might puke."

“If you haven’t yet, you’re not going to.”

The little pod suddenly jerked a little and the bubble on the end of the arm shrunk to the size of a bowling ball. My stomach was telling me something different from what this old fart was handing out. The rest of what surrounded me became a bit more clear as my brain got used to it. Everything was kind of bendy. I noticed that when I stretched out my arms, my hands seemed very far away. I saw that the bubble that was the room from which the mechanical arm extended was embedded in some sort of static morass of light and dark that looked like what I imagine water frozen suddenly while flowing might look. No, that’s not it, more like frozen flames or perhaps a combination of the two. It stretched away into infinity like a three dimensional river. “What is that stuff the bubble is in?”

“That’s the time stream.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“How long is how much time?”

“Again, although it has space-like qualities, it is not space. I have taken glimpses into it with a microscope and have gotten the impression that a few inches might be millions of years.”

Most of us have a hard time defining the exact moment when things went wrong. Not me. It was when I grabbed the controls in the pod to see if I could get it closer to the time stream for a better look.

The old guy’s voice came over the speakers. “What the hell are you doing? You shouldn’t mess with those!”

There was a loud clanging, pinging, crunching noise and suddenly the time stream was rushing at me. “Uh-oh!” I gulped. I squeezed my eyes shut. I thumped, I threw up, I passed out.

It afternoon when I awoke. It was also elsewhere. I was on a mossy riverbank having been tossed out of the pod. The pod itself was partway sunk in about two feet of water. The arm attached to it stuck out behind it and then seemed to twist into nonexistence. It gave me a headache to look at it.

“A frantic voice was issuing from the speakers. “Jake! For God’s sake, Jake can you hear me?”

I got up and looked around. There were no buildings to be seen anywhere and the land looked untouched by the hand of man. There was no obvious human refuse around. Off in the distance was a thin plume of smoke that might have been from a fire. I waded into the river and stuck my head into the pod. “I’m here, man. I must have been out for a long time. The shadows are long.”

“You were out for about thirty seconds, if that. “The shadows are long because that’s where you reentered the time stream.”

“You mean I’ve traveled in time?”

“Time travel is impossible. You didn’t travel through time. You stepped outside of the time stream and reentered at a different point and breaking the equipment in the process, I might add.” He sounded pissed.

“But I *am* somewhere else in time? Where?”

“The computer is looking at images from your onboard camera and making a guess. I think you must be a few million years in the future.” Millions of years! I bent in the middle and threw up again.

“What happened?” I asked.

“When you decided to screw around with the controls you made the arm move quickly in a direction in which it was unable to take much stress. It is a three dimensional object extended into a higher dimension. It broke in half and now only loose cables connect us. I can’t bring you back until it’s repaired.”

“You could have told me about that beforehand.”

“Yeah, I suppose. I didn’t really consider that.”

Didn’t consider? This guy didn’t impress me as much of a scientist. “Can’t I just climb back along the cables?”

“They won’t bear your weight. You’ll just tear them loose and then we won’t even be in communication and you’ll be stuck there forever.”

“So how are you going to repair it?”

“I have some nanites that are designed to build high strength carbon tubes that can fix it enough that I can drag you back. It will take some time though.”

“Nanites.”

“Yeah, they’re microbe sized machines that can assemble molecular structures like…”

I cut him off. “I know what nanites are. I write science fiction, I just didn’t know there were any that advanced yet. How much time are we talking about?”

“About two weeks.”

“Two weeks!?! I have to be at work on Monday! I’ll lose my job.”

“You can’t blame me for this, Jake. You broke it!”

“Listen, old man, this place is a wilderness. I don’t have so much as a pocket knife! I have my Gajit, but that is not going to be of much use in getting food and shelter.” When I sold the buju story, I treated myself to the most up-to-the-minute cell phone in the world, the Nakamura ***GAJIT***. Besides a phone, it was a full Windows computer with a 20 gig hard drive, a high quality camera, mp3 player and sound recorder all in a package slightly smaller than a pack of cigarettes. It had cost me about two-thousand bucks. I would have traded it in a second for a Swiss army knife at this particular moment.

“The pod will give you some shelter from rain.”

“Really. Is it safe to move it? It’s halfway sunk in a stream.”

“Oh. I guess you’d better not, you might pull out a cable.”

“Dandy. Look, you have to make a few calls for me. I’ll give you the numbers of my boss and my friend, Jerry.”

“Jake…I don’t think that would be a good idea. This research has yet to be published, ….I just can’t afford to….”

“HOLY SHIT! Are you kidding me? You are seriously proposing to just leave me here out of touch with the entire human race?” I had to catch my breath. “Are you planning on cutting those cables yourself?”

“Jake, what do you think I am?”

“Irresponsible, for one thing and potentially homicidal.”

“No, no, no. I *will* get you home, I *have* to, but I just can’t have any publicity.

I threw up my hands and just stepped out of the pod and waded ashore. I couldn’t listen to him anymore. “Jake!…Jake!” The old guy called from the speakers.

“I gotta figure out where I’m gonna sleep. I’ll talk to you later.” I shouted back. There wasn’t that much around. I didn’t feel like eating and that was a good thing because I had no idea which plants were safe to eat and I had no way to hunt animals, not that I had seen any. I hadn’t made any progress by the time the sun started going down so I returned to the pod and strapped myself in putting my feet up against the wall so they wouldn’t be in the water. I discovered a solitaire game on the laptop computer and played at that until I dozed off.

I woke with a start at sunrise having heard a loud, low honking noise. A few feet away there were some creatures on the riverbank. Large and heavy, they were birds, some relative of ducks or geese, but these were the size of buffalo and apparently flightless. I called out to see if the old guy was around, but no response came back through the speaker. The birds were covered in shaggy looking brown feathers and had short bills. Their legs were thick and scaly with the toes joined into a broad flat foot with a single heavy claw on the end. They were scraping moss from the rocks with their bills. They would stop occasionally to honk at one another or to nudge each other or clatter their bills together in some sort of symbolic fighting. Or was it courting? How the hell would I know? I wondered how hard it would be to kill one, but looking at the toe claw made me think I didn’t want to try. I pulled out my Gajit and took a few pictures of them and decided to wait until they moved along to get out of the pod.

I walked out to a mass of shrubbery that was about two hundred yards away and discovered that they were blueberry bushes. They were neither large nor all ripe, but I was hungry and didn’t care. When I turned around I saw a group of people. While astonished, I was also horrified. They were heading toward the pod!

I ran back to the bank of the river as fast as I could and awaited their approach. They didn’t appear to be in any hurry just sort of ambling in my general direction. As they came closer, I realized that they were not quite human. The proportions of their faces and bodies were peculiar. Their faces were flatter than regular humans

but their noses were large and almost blade like. The eyes were large with an owlish appearance and they had very bushy eyebrows. Some of the men had facial hair in the form of two patches on their lower jaws I couldn't immediately tell if they shaved it in that shape or it just grew that way. The hair on their heads was identical in all of them being a kinky mop that grew close to the skull. Their skin was a deep chestnut brown. All had distinctly full lips. They were clothed in tunic-like garments that were made of woven *something*. I later learned that it was made from the down of the giant goose critters. They were all shod with leather sandals of an odd design. That made sense because their feet were also of an odd design having only three toes with the largest one in the center. Humanity had made some changes! I hoped they wouldn't think I was a monster.

They finally got to where I was and I tried to control the butterflies in my stomach. A woman in front looked at me and said…Well, I can't even make the sounds she made. Like a rattling sound mixed with a few sort of musical syllables. I shrugged my shoulders, extended my hand and said "Hello!"

She looked at me more closely and the pupils of her enormous eyes dilated wide. I would never call this woman "pretty", but there was so much personality in her features and expression that I couldn't help but feel admiration. "Hello!" she said in a perfect imitation of me. There was even my slight trace of a New York accent, like she was from the old neighborhood. She likewise extended her hand and I clasped it in mine. She was a head taller than me and her hand was as large as mine, finely formed with long tapered fingers. The hand shake was a promising start. The others in their party, there were six in all, gathered around to examine me. They were all around the same height, which was six foot five or so. It was like being mobbed by a basketball squad. As I got a chance to see them all close up I saw that their clothing was embroidered in wonderful patterns and they were armed with knives made of stone or ceramic. I pointed at one and the fellow simply handed it to me to examine. It had been carved from some very hard stone, possibly jade, with incredible workmanship. It was finely balanced and I was pretty sure that it could be thrown with deadly accuracy. When I handed it back to him he pointed at the bulge in my vest so I handed him my Gajit. The phone and internet wouldn't be of any use, but I showed him how the digital camera function worked snapping his picture and then showing it to him on the palmtop. He seemed to clearly understand the function. I played an mp3 file, but that just made them all look a little uncomfortable. It probably didn't sound like music to them. The man handed back the Gajit. I put my hand on my chest and said "Jake Zimmer."

He pronounced back my name perfectly and seemed to understand that it was my name. He then touched his own chest and said "Longdorn Snikang" Except that there was a sound like sticks whacking together in the first word and a sound like church bells in a beehive in the second. I simply didn't have the vocal apparatus to

pronounce it correctly. I said “Longdorn Snikang” and he looked at me as if I had said a dirty word. I pointed at my throat and made a few vowel sounds and shrugged my shoulders.

The group exchanged a few swift words between themselves and then turned their attention back to me. The woman who had first spoken to me touched her chest and said “Klutig Alshoin” but, of course, there were a few sounds thrown in there that can’t be expressed in the Latin alphabet or by the human tongue. I pronounced it back as the closest approximation I could manage and she nodded and then pronounced it again as I had. They were going to try to work with me. They all started pointing at objects. They didn’t even bother to say their words for them as they were confident that I could not pronounce them. One would point and I would say “rock” or “sky” or “river”. Then for a while, they seemed to have quite a bit of fun miming verbs for me to name like “run”, “jump”, “sit” or “throw”. None of them *ever* made a mistake nor did any of them ever have to be told more than once. I had an idea for something I wanted to try. I pulled out the Gajit that had a virtual Rubik’s cube game on it and showed Klutig what the idea was for solving it and how to use the stylus on the Gajit. I wasn’t all that surprised when she solved it in a little under a minute and a half. This species of human was far more intelligent than *homo sapiens*. It wouldn’t have surprised me at all to discover that the average person of their species was considerably smarter than the very brightest of my own kind. No wonder they found learning my simple language the easiest solution for communicating with me. They were treating me as I might a three year old with a speech impediment! To them, I was an idiot.

While we were going through all of this, old man’s voice suddenly squawked forth from the speakers. I dashed into the water. “Jake! Jake! Are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here. Have you made any progress?”

“ I set the nano-machines to work, they ought to make the arm rigid enough to move in a while.”

“How long a while?”

“At least a week. It’s the best I can do. How did you get through the night? Did you find food?”

“I found some fruit. Is the laptop still networked to your system?”

“Yes.”

“I’m putting some files from my Gajit on it.” I matched up the IR ports of the Gajit with the laptop and copied over my pictures.

“Man, those are some ugly ducks!” There was a lengthy pause. “Those are people….sort of. Are you in trouble?”

“I don’t think so, but I’m trying to make friends so they might give me food and shelter.”

“Be careful. Look, if you can, if it’s clear enough, take a picture of the sky at night and upload it. I’ll be able to figure out your position in time from it at least a little better than I have now.”

I heard splashing behind me and turned to see that my companions had waded into the water to get a look at the pod and the arm that twisted away into nowhere. I held up my hands. “Please. Do not touch this thing! My life depends on it!” They still didn’t understand all of my words, but my urgency was clear enough. They backed off without an argument.

The one called Longdorn Snikang asked, “What is it?”

“It is what I need to get back to my home.” He accepted the answer giving a nod. I think he got the gesture from me. I had noticed that their mannerisms seemed more normal as I spent more time with them. I think they might have been making an effort to make their new pet comfortable.

I walked out of the water and they followed.

I assumed that the woman called Klutig was their leader or at least had some sort of higher status, so I went to her and pointed at my stomach and said “Food?”

She said the word back with the same interrogative inflection. Then she said “Food? Yes!” and pulled from a pouch a strip of dried meat. It looked like a bit of jerky. I guess I had expected something a bit different advanced humans of the future. I took a bite. It had been flavored with herbs.

I found it edible, even quite tasty. Klutig said. “Come to our shelter place.”

She mimed with her arms a roof over her head.

“House.” I said, and mimed likewise. I pointed at the pod, which was the most house like thing in sight.

She looked thoughtful and then repeated the shelter gesture three times in raped succession.

“Houses.” I said “Village!”

She pondered that but said only, “Come with us.” I must remind you that this command of English came to them after only a couple of hours acquaintance. In this same time I had learned almost nothing of their language. They led me off in the direction they had been heading when they first saw me. It was the same direction in which I had seen a plume of smoke the previous day.

As we walked, one of the party began to speak, or that is what I thought at first but his syllables were sustained and oddly rhythmic. When a second member of the party joined in, I realized that it was singing, but of a type I had never heard since these people had much more clever voices than any of my age. As the whole group joined, the effect was that of an orchestra although the type of music was completely foreign. I tried nodding my head to the rhythm, but the timing was too tricky. I recorded it with my Gajit to send to the old guy.

Just around the time I was starting to get a little tired we reached our destination. I guess it was about three quarters of a mile from the pod along the river. There was a small group of neatly constructed round huts that seemed to have been made from wood and reeds. I saw nothing that resembled a vehicle or a metal tool or even a domestic animal. Looking around, I saw several similar groupings of huts joined by dirt paths. "Village." I said to Klutig.

"Village." She replied.

I looked around for any sign of technology, but there was almost nothing. All the tools were wood or stone and they had some beautifully made clay pots, but no metal and no domesticated animals. I said, "You guys are cave men, aren't you?"

I don't know what I expected them to say. Klutig said, "I don't know." It was clear enough. I was among primitives. Brilliant primitives, but primitives nonetheless. I didn't understand how people this far in the future could have fallen into this state particularly when they had evolved so much.

I was shown around and got to increase their vocabulary with words like "fire", and "ceramic" and "cook". Others from the village came to meet me. They all wanted to see my Gajit and my digital watch and were absolutely mind-blown by the idea that the symbols on its face were numbers. These people were pre-literate and pre-numerate. They had no system for writing or tallying. I showed a few of them numbers 1 through 10 scratched in the dirt and then the teens and twenties. One of them quickly extrapolated the numbers up to 99 and after I wrote the figure for 100 they had the whole game. I showed addition and subtraction and one of them "invented" multiplication! I started to think that I had better be careful what I showed them because they were so quick on the uptake. Before too long, the entire village was playing with numbers in the dirt.

Shortly after we arrived, the party who brought me led me to the river bank and they peeled off their clothing and started bathing. They urged me to do likewise unsubtly holding their noses and pointing at me. As I splashed myself I looked at them. They had little body hair just a slight downy coating on the calves and forearms of the men and no pubic or axilary hair on any of them. They did not have pigmented areolae. Klutig had a marvelous grace to her movements and splendid lines to her body. She was definitely beautiful but she was not sexually attractive to me. It was more like the beauty of a fine racehorse. None of the women had particularly large breasts. Perhaps they didn't figure highly in sexual display in this species. I noticed that the men had larger earlobes than the women. Like females of my own species, the women had a curve softening layer of subcutaneous fat. The men and women seemed to be about the same size and weight with the women averaging only slightly smaller and their muscular development seemed about equal as well. Perhaps the division of labor would not be as distinct as in my species.

They also had an interest in my body. My feet drew a lot of attention with my extra (to their mind) toes. I had to keep slapping hands away from my privates that seemed to be fascinating because I was circumcised. My coating of body hair impressed them as well. I wondered if any of our ape relatives survived into this era. I guessed not given the fact that they were all pretty rare in my time. They wouldn't even have the concept of "hairy as an ape". Actually, I had seen no other mammals at all save for a bat that had flown over the previous evening. They might be uncommon now. These people had no dogs. Among my own kind even the most primitive peoples kept dogs, but apparently man's best friend must have had a falling out with his partner somewhere along the line.

I noticed something interesting. At first I had thought that these folk seemed to be curiously lacking in emotion, but as time went on they seemed more animated and natural. I realized that they used different facial expressions for emotions than I did. That actually isn't that odd. In my time our closest relatives, the chimpanzees had slightly different expressions from us. The thing is, these people adopted mine as part of my language. They just figured out what I was indicating by moving certain muscles in my face and made those same motions where appropriate.

The village was a busy place with work and play. There were a number of people preparing a meal of roasted birds. I examined one of the birds which was about the size of a turkey covered with stubby quills. The wings were short, naked and muscular with heavy claws and the beak was short and blunt. The eyes were small. Everything about it pointed to a burrowing way of life. I had no way of telling what it had descended from. Several of the birds were being set up on wood spits, which were arranged on a frame and joined with a braided rope so that if one as turned, all would turn with it.

In this way a single person could see to the roasting of a dozen of these birds.

I was offered what seemed to be some kind of fermented beverage. If you were very forgiving, you could call it wine. It had a complex flavor, but it didn't have great appeal for me. I noticed that it was consumed freely by all including children but there was no sign of drunkenness as a result. I wondered if alcohol didn't have an intoxicating effect on these people. If that was the case, it could be used for its preservative qualities, but not dull the senses.

I ate with them and listened to them chatter and sing in their impenetrable language. When night fell, I took some pictures of the starry sky for the old man. There was a half moon and I looked as closely as I could to see if any features had changed. There was a new rayed crater to the north of Copernicus in the Ocean of Storms. It wasn't as large as its neighbor, but very bright. Using the zoom on the Gajit camera, I saw that there was a network of very fine lines drawn through the lowlands. I couldn't tell what they were, but there was no doubt that they were

artificial. One of them was broken by the new crater. Whatever they were, they were ancient, the work of my people, not these new men.

I slept in a hut with Klutig and her husband, a man who's name I pronounced as "Davring", but included a sound like a distant train whistle.

I discovered that these people were in the habit of going nude when they were at home, and later I also discovered that they were not shy about having sex with me in the room. They had put me on a mat woven of some resilient grass. It was as comfortable as a futon and smelled wonderful. If I wrapped some of it around my head it muffled the sound of their energetic love making. In the morning, I was given some more of the roasted bird as well as some apples. That morning, I saw one of their neighbors nursing an infant. She was a baby girl and she would occasionally pause from nursing to converse with her mother even though she had the appearance of a only a three or four month old. I asker her mother how old the child was. "24 phases of the moon." She said. I could see that the baby was still far from being able to walk.

"When shall she walk?"

"60 phases of the moon." I supplied her with the word "month". Their children don't walk until their fifth year. That's a long time to be a babe in arms. It made me wonder.

"How long is your life?"

"1800 months." One hundred and fifty years! These people had not even a concept of medicine yet! The babe turned her head to me and spoke a few words in her language.

"What did she say?"

"She asked if you were the…", She was struggling with her limited English vocabulary, "…surprising mystery little mind."

I couldn't help but smile. "'Wonderful idiot' are the words you are looking for." I stroked the child's head and said, "Yes, I am the wonderful idiot."

"Wonderful idiot!" She pronounced perfectly as she smiled angelically.

This situation was hard on my ego. When a civilized man comes among primitives, maybe he thinks he will be treated with awe, perhaps even mistaken for a god. Not this man, not these primitives.

I told Klutig that I had to return to the pod to make sure it was all right. She walked down along the river with me. As we walked, we talked. She remembered every English word she had heard and understood the meaning of, but we had only known one another for a day. I asked her, "How did the world begin?" hoping to learn something of their religion.

She said, "It is not known." I was shocked. My species has always filled in the blanks in their knowledge of the world with some sort of myth or speculation..

“Do you think it might be the work of gods?” She didn’t know the word. “All powerful invisible beings that made the universe.”

She looked at me with an expression that I was completely unable to read. “What would have made these beings?”

“Perhaps they have been there always.”

“If they have been there always, one could simply say that the world has been here always and need no invisible beings to account for it.”

“I suppose that you could but what if you knew that the universe had not been here always?”

“I think that I do know it has not always been here. The hills and mountains get worn down by wind and water. If the world had been here forever, it should be flat everywhere.” The argument didn’t show any knowledge of geology, but it did reflect the attitude that knowledge of the world was gained by observation.

“So you have no gods and yet you do not know how the world came to be.”

“I think we can learn how it happened, but we do not presently know.” The principal that the universe is knowable, not forever a mystery reserved to gods! These people were not like my species psychologically at all. They had a complete absence of superstition.

We arrived at the pod. Emerging from the twisted bit of space where the arm terminated was a great black hairy tangle. The carbon nanotubes were starting to make their appearance. I called out to the old man and told him I was alright and uploaded my photos. He told me to wait a minute while he compared my pictures of the night sky with a star chart. “You are somewhat more than five million years in the future from the twenty-first century.”

Mind boggling. I told him about the people I had met. Why were they savages and not living in some super scientific utopia?

“It looks like our people must have carried on for a good while. Those lines on the Moon look like some sort of transport system, maybe for an automated mining operation or perhaps even people were living there. It doesn’t look like it had been terraformed. That would have taken hundreds of years to do and required an economy of huge and enduring power. That must never have happened. I doubt that *homo sapiens* lasted more than a couple of thousand years beyond our century. I think some sort of global change happened, maybe a really big ice age or perhaps an asteroid impact. You haven’t seen many mammals so there might have been a mass extinction. Humans must have been almost obliterated and those that remained were forced to give up every vestige of civilized life.”

“So then why are these people here?”

“In a civilization, evolution by natural selection can’t take place. Survival of the fittest simply isn’t the rule. We strive to accommodate the physically less fit and the mentally less sharp so they have as much a shot at breeding as anyone else.

Wild nature is less forgiving. With humanity forced into the wild, evolution took place, humans changed. There might even be other types around. I think you are meeting these people just as they are beginning to discover culture. It will probably take far less time for them than it did for us to build a global civilization judging from how quickly they understood the concept of our numbering system and our language. Pretty much anything that you show them, they will pick up on if they have a chance of comprehending it. I find it fascinating that they seem to understand that your Gajit is beyond them. A primitive tribe of *homo sapiens* would have assumed that it was some sort of magic that they could reproduce if they knew the correct incantation or sacrifice."

Klutig's voice came from behind me. "What is *homo sapiens*?"

"It's what my kind calls itself. It means 'wise man'."

Klutig laughed and I didn't blame her. "Who is that you are speaking with?"

"It is Jayzee, the man who will bring me home. He is repairing my device."

"*My* device." Came old guy's voice over the speaker.

"Will you allow me to talk to him?"

Klutig pulled up her tunic so it was shorter and re belted it, then waded out and put her head into the pod. "Are you the one who makes hair grow from a twist in the air?"

There was silence from the old man and then "Who am I speaking to?"

"I am Klutig Alshoin." She sad the name without the supplemental sounds unpronounceable by *h. saps*. "Do you make the hair grow?"

"Um, yes, but it's not hair, they are single, very rigid molecules of carbon."

Klutig said the word 'molecules' and looked at me. "Very small bits of stuff. Everything is made of them and every kind of stuff is made of a different kind of molecule."

She appeared to digest that information, but made no comment on it. "What is 'carbon'?"

"It is one of the simplest kinds of stuff. The soot from a fire is carbon and so is most of the ash left over after something is burned."

She said back to the speaker "Soot and ash are not rigid."

Jayzee said "They can be made to be if you have the tools to stack up their atoms in the right way."

Klutig said the word 'atoms' and looked at me.

"The very smallest bits of stuff. They so very small that they can never be seen by the human eye. Most often they combine together to make other things and hide their nature in the combination."

The old guy added, "Atoms are the smallest bits of stuff that have identity. If you break a piece off of an atom of carbon, it is no longer carbon."

Klutig was silent. I thought that the answers to her questions were so far beyond her experience coupled with the fact that she was hearing them in a new language that it would be meaningless to her. She surprised me. “Fire must be like very many very small hammers that break…” she hesitated for just a beat “molecules into atoms!”

Oh my God! I wonder what that degree of insight must feel like. She could probably be taught college level chemistry in a week and she was just a savage! When her people start to produce great scientists, what will they be like? “Yes, it is very much like that.”

The old man said, “Amazing.”

Klutig said, “This explains many of the things some of my people have wondered about. We knew that when something burned, some of it became like the air….”

“A gas.”

“..a ‘gas’, and some of it became like the Earth, but none of it was like the wood. The wood must be made of gases and earths.”

“‘Solids’, not ‘earths’. We call them ‘elements’.”

“Elements…such an important thing to understand. How long did it take your people to discover it?”

“A man named Democritus understood it over twenty centuries ago, but no one really started to sort it out so everyone could understand until about one hundred and fifty years ago.”

“Why?”

“Because we are not as bright as you and we do not naturally say ‘I don’t know’ about things in nature the way you do. When we don’t know something, our first conclusion is usually the work of a god.”

She looked deep into my eyes, perhaps for a hint that I might be joking. Finding none, she said, “You are all the most wonderful idiots. You have lived your brief lives over many centuries and unraveled the world’s secrets without even knowing how to really think! Tell me, have you fought over your ideas about the world?”

“Frequently, bitterly, violently, horribly.”

“ I suppose that *which* in particular of the invisible beings are responsible for what has also caused conflict, perhaps differences in how those beings are honored?”

“That has caused the worst conflicts of all.”

An expression of bottomless sadness washed briefly over Klutig’s features and quickly disappeared. She was too excited by what she was learning to dwell on the pathos of my race. “Where do your people live?”

“Jake!” came The old guy’s voice over the speaker. “I need to talk to you alone.”

I asked Klutig to allow me some privacy. “They aren’t telepathic or anything, are they?”

“I haven’t seen any evidence of that. Their spoken language is apparently very subtle and complex. If they could read each other’s minds, I would expect it to be very simple or even nonexistent.”

He sighed in relief. “Good. Don’t tell her or any of them that it is possible to cross time. If they know it can be done, they will do it. Who knows what sort of ideas they might have? What if they take it into their heads to ‘help’ us?”

“*Time travel is impossible.*” I mocked. “I’ve already introduced them to our system of numeration. The whole lot of them were doing math within a few minutes. After that, I decided to think hard about what I tell them. You saw how quickly Klutig picked up the basics of chemistry. Remember that these are basically cave men here. They make only the most basic pottery, they practice no agriculture that I can see and they use no metals. They have seen metal on me, but they haven’t asked about it yet. They will and I think almost anything I say about it will let them know that it is hiding in the rocks around them thanks to our little chemistry lecture.”

“Their bronze age will probably start in only a couple of generations anyway if they hear about metals from you or not. The main thing is to make sure that they think you are just from the tribe over the hill and not from millions of years in the past. As far as they are concerned, the pod is some sort of magic chariot.”

“They don’t have superstition or magical thinking of any kind that I have seen. They don’t have science either. Yet. They haven’t asked too much about the pod save for the ‘hair’ thing. I guess I’m better off if I can just keep mum about the whole thing.”

“That won’t be good for too much longer. Klutig Alshoin knows that my voice comes from somewhere and she isn’t going to be put off by any stuff about magic and gods. I know you were hungry, but you really shouldn’t have taken up with these people.”

“I don’t see as I had much choice. I consider myself lucky that they don’t think of me as property.”

“Well, there you have it. I’m afraid that they may come and ‘correct’ the past and you are afraid that you may corrupt the future.”

“I just don’t belong here. Every part of me just doesn’t feel right. I’m this irritant foreign body in their pre-history.”

Klutig called to me. “Jake, I am needed at the village.” Of course she was. I shouldn’t have assumed that she had nothing better to do than act as my baby sitter.

I said back to her. “Go ahead without me.”

“Shall you come back to the village?”

“Eventually.” She looked at me blankly. “In time.”

“Eventually.” She said. She smiled warmly at me, turned and walked off.

I sat in the pod for hours talking with the old guy. He was less worried than I was. “It’s not like you are in the past and your actions will alter our world. You’re in the distant future and you effect only the future, same as if you were back here.”

“These aren’t savages of our own kind who live in our world. They are starting out fresh without our preconceptions and prejudices and innocent of superstition. I just feel like the most innocent thing I say to them will really fuck things up.”

“If they are really all that smart, they will be able to discriminate the good things from the bad.”

“Yeah. They’re smart. We’re stupid.”

“Exactly.”

I returned to the village in the dark using the screen of the Gajit as a flashlight, about the only service it was able to provide as a survival tool.

I spent a couple more days with the primitives. Their children found me quite entertaining. I taught them Soccer which seemed innocent enough. We made the ball from woven reeds. They loved it and played constantly and kept modifying the game until it was unrecognizable. I was unable to keep up with the constant rule changes.

I went with some of them on a hunt for the burrowing birds. They lived in underground colonies that had many entrances. The hunters would block all but one with large flat rocks and then beat the earth with heavy sticks. One by one, the birds would stick their head out of the single open hole only to have them bashed in by a hunter and pulled out. In a short time, another would appear and the braining would be repeated. This continued until they had about a dozen birds.

I had assumed that the woman Klutig Alshoin was some sort of leader and she was, but she was one among several. There wasn’t a very distinct division of labor and everyone did pretty much all jobs as they came up including decision making so the group had no single chief any more than it had a single hunter or single tool maker. These people had a natural knack for arriving at a consensus. I doubted that their future would ever have monarchies or even democracies where a majority could impose its will on the minority. They would more likely tend toward collectivist, but not necessarily socialist or communist type systems. They might even be able to make anarchy viable in a large society. Of course I was only speculating. There were only about thirty people in this village, who knows if they could even get along in larger groups. Even so, Klutig was very adept at management and always seemed to know where every one in the village was and what they were doing so she was often in charge of planning and execution of anything that involved the whole village like big hunts, seasonal moves or defense.

Defense. There were carnivorous creatures that would occasionally take it into their minds to treat the village as a source of meat, flocks of large flightless raptors which seemed to occupy the top of the food chain. I only got a fleeting look at one, but I think that they were probably evolved from owls. They had huge eyes with good binocular vision and even bigger hooked beaks. They were rather like the great "terror birds" that had lived at various times in the past. It was a shape and lifestyle that closely resembled that of their predatory dinosaur cousins. It required a high level of organization to drive them off without large numbers of casualties, particularly when they came at night. As a young girl, Klutig had invented a way to corral the birds with fire and then bring them down with spears and rocks from a safe distance. I never got a chance to see this particular operation which must be a dicey proposition at best. Klutig had lost her first husband to one of these creatures. Davring, her current husband had been his brother.

I returned to the pod daily to check the progress of the nanites. After a couple of days they had created a basket-work of narrow shafts all around the broken beam and were slowly drawing the broken pieces together. I knew damned well that the technology to do stuff like this didn't exist yet. I got into the pod and called the old man's name. "How are you doing?"

"Just fine. I see that there has been a lot of progress."

"You bet! I ought to be able to retrieve you in about eight hours."

"That's a lot less time than a week. How come you didn't know how fast the nanites would work?"

There was a pause. "It varies from case to case."

"I think it's time for you to be straight with me. You don't seem to know a whole lot about this technology. You didn't invent this stuff, where did it come from?"

There was an even longer pause. "I borrowed it."

"You stole it?"

"I'm not going to keep it."

"Oh God. You stole a time machine! Who made it, someone over at MIT?"

"No. The Lutex corporation."

"Never heard of 'em."

"I'm not surprised."

I breathed a deep sigh. "As soon as you get me back, I don't ever want to see you again. You almost got me killed!" I jumped out of the pod and stalked back to the village to make my good-byes.

They actually were sad to see me go even though I was basically useless. I suppose I provided them with some diversions while I was there…and taught them about math and chemistry. I didn't know if I would ever get over the guilt over having meddled in their lives. I felt like I had taken their inocence.

Klutig insisted that she see how the thing would take me home. After all of her village's hospitality, I couldn't refuse. She and Davring walked back to the riverbank with me. The two broken ends of the mechanical arm were perfectly fused together and surrounded by a web work of black shafts. They were only about a quarter inch in diameter, but there were hundreds of them. I allowed Klutig and Davring to carefully run their hands over the carbon fibers. Klutig ran her hand far enough up the beam to observe it to twist with the beam toward a higher dimension. I tapped her on the back and said "Maybe you shouldn't do that."

She stopped and turned to me "The…everywhere…grows."

"What?"

She made some weird motions with her hands. I realized that she was showing me height, width and depth.

"Space." I said. "Yes, there is…more space…out that way. Crazy space." I really should have been keeping my stupid mouth shut.

"Are you going through crazy space to go home?"

"Yes."

"I would like to see that."

"I can't show you. I am never coming back, neither is anything or anyone who goes with me. I'm not just leaving your village, I'm leaving your whole world behind." I just assumed that she wouldn't believe me, but she got a real strange look on her face.

"I would like to see that."

"No!"

The old man's voice came through the computer. "Get aboard, Jake."

I got into the pod and strapped in. I waived goodbye as the arm started to lift the pod. There was a weird rotation and I started to feel dizzy/queasy. Suddenly I felt something bounce just as I was pulled through into the strange hyper-dimensional goofy zone outside the time stream. I whipped my head around to see if the arm had broken again and to my horror saw that Klutig was on the arm with her arms and legs wrapped around it. She looked terrified but still gave me a nervous little smile. The bubble that contained my world started to swell in size and Klutig popped through it with me and the pod following a second later. Klutig dropped off of the arm as my pod was being lowered. She got up to her hands and knees before she barfed heartily all over the garage floor.

Both me and the old man hollered "HOLY SHIT!" as I unstrapped and got out.

"What have you done?!?" I cried.

"I wanted to see the crazy space."

"Well, I hope you enjoyed it because you gave up your whole world to do it!" I had no idea what to do next.

The old man said "Why in the fuck did you bring *her* along? Are you nuts?"

"First of all, it wasn't my idea and second, *you* shut up! You started this whole mess!"

"It was an accident! I just needed to keep you busy long enough to cool down."

"Cool down?"

"You were going to get into a fight with Dave Beiderman."

"How do you know Dave Beiderman? What makes you think I was going to get into a fight with him? Why the fuck do you care? What the hell is going on?" I was getting louder and louder as I went on. Something was even weirder here than it appeared on the surface and the surface was already as weird as it gets.

Klutig was starting to regain some equilibrium and her eyes grew huge as she watched our conversation. "You are both…the same." She said.

For some reason what she said enraged me. I pointed at Jayzee and said "I'm nothing like this guy!"

"You *are* him."

I assumed that this was one of her language gaps. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"You and him are the same." She had an expression of true awe on her face.

Ridiculous. "Klutig, all the members of my species probably look alike to you." I turned back to the old man and he was nodding his head and looking guilty. It hit me like a wrecking ball! "Oh no. Jayzee. J.Z. Jake Zimmer. You *are* me."

"Um…yeah. The day you got into a fight with Beiderman, he tossed you out. Not only did he not buy anything from you…from me again, he spread the word that I was 'difficult.' Everywhere…in Boston, New York, the Internet….everywhere. I just had a stupid hot-headed moment and never got another paying writing job. I worked as a janitor at Lutex until they finally made me retire last week. I hung on until I was eighty-five. When I went home, I took the keys with me. My life wasn't so bad, but I kept dwelling on how I had blown it. Lutex had the Hyper-dimensional probe in development but had specific rules for its use. They knew that it could make it possible to move an object in time. Some of the technology was derived from Charlie Hines' work, but when they hired me at Lutex they didn't know I was familiar with it and probably wouldn't have hired me if they did… Woah!"

Klutig had gotten to her feet and then momentarily silenced the old man by removing her vomit spattered tunic standing nude in the garage.

"No!" I said. "Klutig, please put it back on."

"It's dirty."

"I know, but so far as my people are concerned, your skin is dirtier." She looked truly offended. "I'm sorry, but you left your whole life behind and there are going to be different rules in your new one and those rules are all made by people who are not anywhere near as smart as you." She put the tunic back on. "I'll take you

home and we'll figure out what to do with you, but you are going to have to be patient with me. With all of us."

I turned back to the old man. "You may think you have fixed my life, but look what you have done to hers! Do you think you will go back and find that you're a famous man? Think about it you crazy old coot! You should have vanished in a puff of logic when you changed your past, but here you stand looking stupid! When you go back your life will be exactly the same because all you did was create an alternate path of time. I used to think I was a pretty smart guy, but between meeting Klutig's people and learning that an older but apparently no wiser version of myself can pull a stupid stunt like this has taught me some humility. I can't believe this shit! My future self coming back to correct the past! It's the world's most tired science fiction cliché. I wouldn't *dare* write a story like this!" I was literally shaking with rage. I took a few deep breaths and tried to calm down. Finally I said. "Just go back where you came from."

Jayzee scowled at me. "You're not even going to say 'thanks'?"

I afraid that the reader would probably think less of me if they thought I was the kind of guy who would punch an old man in the nose, so feel free to pretend that it didn't happen if you want. Anyway, after stuffing some tissue up his nose, he ended up getting in the pod himself and popping through a hole in space. Somehow, I neither know nor care how, the entire apparatus and everything else in the room except for me and Klutig were pulled through with him and we were alone. I opened the garage door and revealed our world to Klutig's astonished eyes.

As we walked down to Union Square, Klutig was looking this way and that. Every sight was brand new to her. People were staring at her too. I got her into a cab as quickly as possible and headed back for Cambridge. So there we were in the back seat of a cab with the world whizzing by. She was hunched over under the low roof of the cab and started to look very sad. "Davring." she said, pronouncing it in her native fashion and the distant train whistle in the name sounded infinitely tragic. I think she that she realized she had lost her entire world. It was very likely that she was now the most intelligent being on Earth and she had screwed up. That was pretty humbling too.

4
Amy Camus Fixes Everything

Jungle Ranch

(aka, "The Range Buddies in the Hidden City", "Secret City of Africa".)
(120 minute feature version [1956] "The Mysterious Jungle") (90 minute colorized feature version for television [1989] "Cowboys of the Congo")
Based on the "Range Buddies" stories by Clifton Auger appearing in
Wild West Mystery Magazine
Republic Pictures
Dir: Ford Beebe, Alan James

Synopsis

Chapter One.
The Man From Montana

Wealthy Montana rancher Will Hadley (C. Montague Shaw) is the major investor in an African diamond mine but discovers his investment is not making expected returns. He takes his son Christopher "Kit" Hadley (John Carroll) with him into the African jungle to protect his investment. There, Hadley discovers that the mine foreman, Dugan (Grant Withers) and his gang of thugs have been embezzling and using the diamonds to hire native muscle to control the local tribes who think that Dugan is a god because he only appears to them in a fright mask calling himself "Mighty Matomba". The elder Hadley discovers the ruse by overhearing a phone-call, but is murdered in cold blood by Dugan's assistant, Trask (Frank Hawks) before he can tell Kit. Kit discovers Trask while he is attempting to dispose of the body in a quicksand bog and finds himself in a shoot out. When
Kit turns because of a sudden noise, Trask hits him with a branch knocking him into the quicksand. The last shot of the episode shows his ten-gallon floating on the surface of the bubbling bog.

Jerry put the page down. “I don’t get it.”

“It’s a synopsis of a cliffhanger serial that was never made!”

“Only the first chapter?”

“There will be twelve altogether. I figure it can run over a year in the BIG IDEA.”

“I don’t think Beiderman will be interested.”

“I’ll get him to print it, you watch.”

For once, Jerry was over my place for dinner. When we dined together, it was usually at his place because he is the true master of chicken. He has been perfecting it for years and it’s damn near flawless. Nonetheless, this time he was at my place because Klutig was on a cooking kick.

Klutig Alshoin is my room mate. I have been telling people that she is my cousin who was driven from her home in the Canary Islands by a volcano. Most of the world who haven’t heard that story assumes she is my girlfriend. Publicly, we call her ‘Amy’, but I’ll get to that in a bit. Just be patient. I will grant you that she is striking, but she’s not my type, and when I say ‘not my type’, I mean not my species. She comes from a distant possible future where humanity continued to evolve. She is six foot-four inches tall, has huge, owlish eyes of a striking green hue and a close skullcap of tightly curled auburn hair. She has a large, but finely formed nose. All in all, her face is suggestive of a painting by Modigliani which is disconcerting on a living human being rather than canvas. Her body is superbly athletic and yet perfectly feminine with broad hips a tight derriere and high, perfectly formed, if somewhat small breasts. The proportions of her hands are noticeably odd with the fingers longer than is common. Her strangest feature is her feet that have only three toes each. The second toe is the longest and appears to be a fusion of the second and third and the pinkie-toe is simply absent. Sometimes I wonder how many thousands of years before her birth it finally went “wee-wee-wee” all the way home. There are a few other differences that you would notice if you were to see her nude, which you would if you hung around here very much. She prefers not to wear clothing when she is at home and it’s warm enough, although I make her get dressed when people come over. Other men have admired her and I wonder if my problem with not being attracted to her is simply that I *know* she isn’t exactly human. I can be pretty conservative sometimes.

The other thing you need to know about Klutig is that she is the most intelligent being on Earth. She learned English well enough to communicate with most people in about three days. The whole tribe she was living with did including babies. Did I mention that they were primitives? Cavemen without writing or numbers or science! I met her people because a misguided version of myself from the future accidentally propelled me to and stranded me in, a possible future some five-

million years down the road. Are you getting all of this? When he finally was able to bring me back, Klutig hitched a ride.

So here she is in the twenty-first century cooking dinner for me and my friend. Cooking is on of her plethora of interests. Once I taught her to read, which took a couple of days and taught her to use the computer which took a bit less she just *inhaled* our civilization! Our history, our art, our science, our pop-culture, everything. As of that particular night, she had been with me for about eight months and she has tried her hand at hundreds of things, excelling at most of them. It soon became apparent that keeping her completely under wraps was out of the question. Early in her stay with me she discovered my old records of the great Peruvian singer with the eight octave range, Yma Sumac who's voice she could duplicate perfectly. She was a gifted mimic and came equipped with a voice-box that could make many sounds that an ordinary human never could. She could mimic any voice male or female. I'm pretty sure that she could also sing just like Pavarotti or Bob Dylan if she had a mind to. I started to call her Amy Camus in honor of the old urban legend about Yma Sumac and it was a much easier name to get along with in our society than Klutig Alshoin which couldn't be remotely linked with any ethnicity that she could realistically be said to resemble. She started to occasionally perform music in little clubs under that name and that is how she came to be known. She developed other interests including, but not restricted to, painting (interesting and intricate, but not to my taste), Basketball (incredible!), fashion design (stuff only insane people would wear), dance (You would think she was too big to be graceful, but you would be wrong), gardening (She grew most of our vegetables at a rather accelerated rate of speed in a plot beside the building and a number of window boxes) and of course cooking. Almost incidentally, she had learned read, write and speak about twenty languages fluently. There is this British guy, Daniel Tammet, who is supposed to have the world's most amazing mind that learned to speak Icelandic pretty well in a week. Klutig took on French, Chinese, Malay and Russian at the same time in that time and spoke them indistinguishably from a native.

She had made a habit of haunting the spice departments of Chinese, Indian, Greek, Korean, Vietnamese and every other kind of specialty grocery in the area. She gets the good stuff because she speaks the language. The sort of stuff she would do with a simple piece of fish was astonishing! Sometimes the flavors were clean and simple, sometimes complex and subtle, often peculiar but never off-putting. If she were to open a restaurant, I'm sure it would be successful, at least with critics.

She had also started to model for Randall Whitney, a painter acquaintance of mine who had become obsessed with painting her nude in increasingly pornographic postures. Their relationship was a strange one. He thought she was

his lover, she treated him like he was her pet. She clearly had affection for him, but not exactly respect. Privately she would tell me that his canvases were childish and would make references to his "cute little penis." I told her that I only hoped that she didn't actually use that phrase around him. I don't want you to think she was naïve at all. When she says something like that, she perfectly understands the male ego and it entertains her to tweak it a bit. In that way she is like any other woman. She understands our culture perfectly and plays it like an angel plays a harp. After her first month here, it was me that was asking her the questions. I really wondered why she would even let a twenty-first century man touch her, it must be like making love to an ape and I say that as one of the apes!

Anyway, that night she had insisted on making chicken for Jerry and I. That was fine with me because I knew it would be better than merely good. Indeed, afterward Jerry said "Miss Amy, I bow before the new mistress of the bird!"

"I'm glad you like it, you didn't think the spices were too…busy?"

The truth was that I think Klutig has a more refined sense of taste and some of the things she does in her dishes are simply too subtle for we mere humans to detect. Me, I just pour lots of hot-sauce on everything. "No! Perfect!"

"Well, there's more if you want it."

Both I and Jerry went for seconds.

Bunny called from the other room, "Hey Jake!" He actually meant Klutig who had completely taken over his care, but he only knew one name. Bunny was a buju, which is an intelligent being from another world, except he wasn't really all that intelligent and the other world was an alternate Earth. He had been raised here where the atmosphere was all wrong and he was malnourished by our foods, the ones he wasn't allergic to. He had been unhappy and slowly dying. Klutig had made an intense study of general biology and also hacked into the Air Force files on the world he came from. The Air Force had been running their own little private war with their world until I accidentally broke the story wide open. Anyway, Klutig had figured out a good diet for him and he was much healthier now. I think he might even be a little smarter. "Jake!" He called, "Come play"

Klutig looked at me and asked, "Would you mind doing the dishes?"

"Not a bit. " I said around a mouth full of chicken. "Just as soon as I'm done."

Once she had left the room, Jerry said to me, "Man, that cousin of yours is something else!" He was well aware of Klutig's true origin, in fact the only one besides me who knew the whole story, but we had both gotten into the habit of referring to her as my 'cousin.'

"Yeah. You know that she might get bored with cooking at any time and move on to something else. As impressive as her brain is, there are only so many hours in a day."

"Oh sure, it's cooking today, brain surgery tomorrow. Ha! That reminds me."

"Of what?"

"The other night, I had a dream about Jelly Roll Morton!"

"Mister Jelly!"

"The same. Anyway, I was sitting in a park reading a newspaper and the paper had all kinds of weird stories in it like one about a boy who turned into a bird and another about a robot becoming president of Bolivia. A guy sat down next to me on the bench and said 'Life has some pretty strange mysteries! I've seen some stuff myself!'

"I turned and saw that it was Morton and was instantly skeptical. You know why."

I certainly did. Jerry and I had a truism about the famous pianist that we used as a rule of thumb. It was more mystical than scientific. "Because anything that Morton *says* is automatically a lie and anything said *about* Morton is automatically the truth."

"Right. So I knew that if he said he had seen some stuff, it was perfectly logical for me to assume that he hadn't seen anything of interest. Nonetheless, he described having played before the king of The Netherlands and his tickling of the ivories had conjured a ghost during the performance. I think that during Morton's entire life, The Netherlands had a queen, but no king and frankly, I doubt he had ever been there. Maybe someone sent him a postcard from Amsterdam once, but I'll bet that's as close as he got. So I said 'I don't think that's right, Jelly!'

"Well, he grinned at me and he says, 'Someone once told that story, anyway.'

"So I was confused. 'Someone said that about you…but you said it too. So is it the truth or a lie?'

"He says, 'You're gonna need a Chinese brain surgeon to untangle that one!' And he just started laughing. My head was all messed up and everything started to fade away. Then I woke up."

"Wow!" I said. "I never meet anyone interesting in my dreams. I only dream about sex, work and money."

After the dishes were done, Jerry and I came out into the living room to find Klutig holding Bunny over her head, zooming him through the air and making a very accurate sound effect of a World War I fighter plane. Bunny was squealing "Wheeeeeee!"

Even in good health, bunny was a disconcerting sight. He didn't really have a head, just a bump with two branches sticking out of it and an asshole where you might think his face belonged. He had two oval feet on shortish legs and two arm-like bracts each of which ended in a parrot beak surrounded by a bunch of squirmy tentacles. Between the walking legs was a mouth that resembled a large toothed vagina and right behind it was a pulpy brown baggy mass. His appearance took some getting used to. One does *not* get used to his odor, an equal mix of

floral/fecal/chemical. It isn't horrible, but it just never fades into the background, it's always there assaulting your nose with its strangeness.

Klutig had been teaching him to dance, sing and do tricks. It turned out that even though he could only use a limited vocabulary in communication, he could remember and sing whole songs. He had sort of a weird, buzzy voice, but perfect diction. Jerry thought that I should work up an act with him, but I had a pretty good idea what the government would think if it became well known that I still had him. I'm sure they think he must have died by now and that is what I want them to think. My being able to produce him as proof of my wild stories annoyed them greatly.

Jerry and I were enjoying a post-dinner glass of cheap Australian wine and listening to a nice new collection of Bob Wills sides when my cell phone buzzed. Dave Beiderman, the feature editor at the Boston BIG IDEA was on the other end. I hate editors and I was constantly getting into pointless hassles with them, Dave in particular. He just rubbed me the wrong way. The only reason I continued to do work for the BIG IDEA was that they paid decent money for a free magazine and I had inside info that Dave would figure in my long term success or at least in my long term avoidance of failure. "Jake! What's the good word?"

"Hey Dave, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"An extra few inches of space opened up and I was hoping you might have something to fill it."

Okay, time to shmooze Dave. "Lemme think. I've had this idea for a kind of a pastiche of old cliffhanger movie serials called *Jungle Ranch*. It would hit all of basic points that made those serials so weird and goofy. It'll be a riot."

I swear to you, I could almost hear Dave's eyes rolling over the phone. "Jake, you are a half decent writer. I just don't see why you keep pitching me this stuff that no one but a few fan-boys..."

"Aficionados."

"Yeah, whatever. …'aficionados' give a damn about. You keep telling me that you are going to write up that rat story in your own words. It would be great if you could get around to that before it gets too stale. We heard it from the news media, but from you we would get the real flavor!"

The truth is that I had been avoiding writing about the rats. I still have the occasional nightmare about them. It was so much easier to just write another fannish pastiche than to pull something from my actual experience. I would rather attempt to channel Edgar Rice Burroughs or H.P. Lovecraft or Johnston McCulley than my own personal experience. Maybe it's an attempt to keep myself at a distance from my own life which becomes increasingly peculiar. I glanced into the other room where the super-intelligent cave-woman from the future was racing through pages on the Internet with a small monster from another dimension curled

up on the desk next to the keyboard. Perhaps it was time to write about my own life. “I’ll tell ya what, Dave. I’ll write up the rat story if you’ll agree to run at least the first few installments of *Jungle Ranch* and let the readers be the judge.”

“Come on, Jake.”

“Look, you want a story that I don’t want to write. I want to write a story that you don’t want to run. We can compromise by doing neither or by doing both. One way both of us are happy the other neither of us are happy. You decide.”

There was about thirty seconds of silence at the other end. “I’ll only pay for the jungle thing if we get a lot of positive feedback.”

“You’ll only pay if you get letters?” Scumbag! “Yeah, o.k. That seems fair enough.” If this were Nazi freaking Germany! “I’ll start work on both. See ya.”

Jerry was shaking his head. “Did you just agree to write for Beiderman for no money?”

“I agreed to take a fee only if the public responds to it.”

“Dipshit. He gets people to write for free all the time with some fake promise or another.”

“Hey! I want to get that story out there! He only agreed to that much if I wrote something about the rats at Crandall.”

Jerry shuddered. “That whole business still gives me the shivers.”

“You and me both, pal.”

From the other room Klutig called, “You’ll get that positive feed back. I wrote some software that can author a thousand unique emails. A million if you want!”

“BIG IDEA doesn’t print a million copies or even fifty-thousand. If you could do twenty or forty emails that would be plenty.”

“The day it hits the street.” She called back.

Jerry looked strange for a second. “Why do you think she wrote that software?”

Uh-oh. I called into the next room. “Klutig, are you a spammer?” There was no answer. “Amy Camus, I’m talking to you!”

“I want to influence the debate regarding the presidential election. Nobody is asking the right questions! I’m planting ideas on every newsgroup and bulletin board that talks about it. It would take too much of my time to write them all myself, so I wrote an AI to do it.”

“That doesn’t seem strictly fair.”

“The politicians make up things to fool the people all of the time. They often have a staff of hundreds of people to do these same kinds of things. The AI is *my* staff. I’m just fooling the politicians into thinking the people are more clear-thinking than they really are.” Klutig didn’t come into my world a blank slate. Because her species ages at a different rate than ours, she appears young, but in fact she lived forty-eight years in the culture of her own people. While not literate,

those people had established traditions and morals and those morals were not an exact match for those generally accepted by twenty-first century civilization. Klutig strongly believes that a competent individual is required to seize power when it is in the hands of the incompetent. Here in my world, that is *all* she sees. I constantly point out to her that we prefer to muddle through on our own and interference by a super-mind from the future would not be well received. Of course, she points out that she is now just as much a part of our time as I am and is duty bound to assert herself in building a better world. The thing about Klutig is that she *always* wins arguments.

"Well, if you could just try not to take over the world that would be great."

"Feh! Who needs the *tsuris*? Running this civilization would be like herding cats!" This line delivered in the voice of an old Jewish woman. She delighted in dialect. During this entire conversation, Klutig continued to type rapidly without stopping. Sometimes I have gone and looked over her shoulder when she works at the computer and it's just confusing. She usually has a number of active windows and she switches back and forth very quickly working on several seemingly unrelated things at once. I obtained a computer of her own only a month after she got here because I couldn't get her off of mine when I needed to write. It was a used one from E-Bay that I got for around a hundred bucks and she proceeded to make modifications to it by adding new boards, a huge amount of memory and various extensions to it. I'm sure that she had the knowledge to make a faster processor but not the equipment or she would have. As it is she wrote original software for the whole system including major modifications to the operating system. It was originally some variety of Linux but now it looked like something completely different. I don't know how to do anything with her machine. It has a screensaver that is designed to entertain Bunny when she is away that has interactive dancing and singing bujus that teach him new songs. One of them occasionally shows up dressed as BooJoo the Happy Bunny. Gives me the creeps bigtime.

Klutig logged off her computer, scooped up Bunny and came back into the living room. She placed him in a large flowerpot of soil and said to him. "Now you sit there and absorb some nice minerals!"

"MIN-rals!" Sang Bunny.

"Join us in some wine, Amy?" Asked Jerry.

"Can't. Randall wants me to come down to the gallery where he is showing. His opening is tonight, you guys ought to come!"

Randall is the painter that I mentioned before. I really didn't want to go. His canvases make me a little uncomfortable. I'm no prude. The nudity doesn't bother me on its own but the poses are over the top, more exploitative than beautiful. I am well aware that if anyone is being exploited in that relationship, that person is

Randall, not Klutig, but I still don't like the paintings and I like the people his shows attract less. It's mostly these pale, somewhat sweaty guys with shifty looks. They look like men with unclean secrets. He makes a good living on the stuff, though. He had a few devoted and well heeled collectors of his work.

"I don't think so." I said.

"Suit yourself." She disappeared into her bedroom for only a few minutes and emerged wearing a long red wig, a short, tight black cocktail dress that didn't leave much to the imagination and a pair of heels that made her head almost touch the ceiling. "How do I look?" She asked.

"Nice." I said. It wasn't one hundred percent sincere. Whenever she got done up, she always showed the best of taste, but she still somehow looked a bit like a drag queen. I'm sure that her height had something to do with that, but it was also the rather chiseled structure of her face.

"Hot stuff!" Said Jerry.

"Thanks! Gotta run!" and she dashed out the door.

Jerry asked "Do you know all the things she gets up to?"

"Not even half and I'm sure that a lot of it I wouldn't understand or would frighten me. Probably both. I just found out last week that she has been investing." The fact is I had fallen into considerable debt with one of my credit cards and was getting increasingly threatening letters from the company. Klutig had just handed me the five grand I needed to pay it off without batting an eye. She said that she had been day trading, and very successfully at that. She won't tell me how much money she has put away, but I'm pretty sure it's plenty.

"So *that's* how she pays for all the 'hobbies'."

"Yeah."

"Are you getting rent from her?"

"Nah, but she is pretty careful not to cost me anything and she has taken such good care of Bunny."

I didn't see Klutig again until after I got home from work the next day. She arrived a little bit after me wearing the same clothes she went to the gallery in. She did this a lot, but it didn't seem to have an effect on her health. She never took drugs and alcohol didn't make her drunk. She could go for long periods of no sleep without ill effect. I think she made it up by sleeping round the clock once in a while.

"Hey there. Spend the night at Randall's?"

"No. I left the opening a little early, I had something to do in New York."

"New York? How did you get there?"

"I flew, silly!"

"You got a flight that night without notice?"

"I went down with Todd Braxton."

“Who the heck is Todd Braxton?”

“He’s the executive vice president in charge of product development of the Dynomex corporation. We took the corporate jet.”

“Of course you did.” I have had similar conversations with Klutig a number of times. “How do you know this guy?”

“He buys a lot of Randall’s work. He wanted to meet me.”

“You mean he wanted to fuck you.”

“You always make it sound so nasty, like wanting to just fuck someone is the worst thing in the world.”

“No, it’s not the worst thing in the world.” We have had *this* conversation before too. “I’m aware that you are in complete control of most situations you get yourself into; it just annoys me that these guys think they are somehow putting one over on you.”

“But they’re not. I only have sex when I want to.”

“But they *think* they are. Randall only paints you so he can sleep with you and show off all the perverted poses you’ll let him paint you in! This Braxton character only flew you to New York to screw you. I suppose he has a ‘cute little penis’ too.”

“Neither as small nor as cute as Randall’s. Just so you know, by the way, *I* am the one who decides how I want to pose.”

“Jeeze!” I wondered why she wanted display herself that way. It just seemed peculiar. Maybe I just didn’t understand her as well as I thought I did.

“Todd had something I wanted, I had something Todd wanted.”

I was starting to realize that it was more than just sex. She explained things to me as if I was a three year old and I sensed that she was also omitting the ‘adult stuff’ as if I were three also. Except in this case, the sex was the part I would understand. “So what was going on in New York?”

“Dynomex is interested in a process I’ve come up with.”

“‘Process’ what kind of process?”

“I better not tell you. I signed a nondisclosure agreement and you can’t keep your mouth shut.”

I had an odd thought. Had she gotten involved with Randall just to meet this Todd Braxton character? That might explain why she wanted to get Randall to make a particular kind of painting because she somehow had found out about Braxton’s tastes. Perhaps nobody’s putting anything over on her, probably exactly the opposite. That would just be too weird. I’ve said the following to her a thousand times. “Whatever.”

She went to her room and pulled off her clothing and came back to cook dinner in the nude. I noticed that she had painted her toenails with red polish that just served to emphasize the weirdness of her feet. She made something with nuts and

tofu and a sauce that was indescribable. I had seconds. I had put on ten pounds since she got on the cooking kick.

In the other room, Bunny just hopped out of his pot and started tap-dancing. He was actually quite good, but the soft pads of his feet made only muffled taps. As he danced, he sang in his odd buzzy voice.

Wait till the sun shines Nellie
and the clouds go drifting by
we will be happy Nellie
don't you cry

Down lover's lane we'll wander
sweetheart you and I
wait till the sun shines Nellie
by and by

Oy vey…I wonder what it would be like to just have a cat.

On Saturday morning Jerry was topping off my coffee when I decided to spill my guts. "I do not know what the hell Klutig has been up to, but I know I don't like it. She is involved in some deal with corporate suits and the whole thing smells." Wow, she was smart not to tell me everything, I was singing like a canary!

"Corporate types, eh? That is hardly ever a good sign."

"You ain't kidding. She's sleeping with this guy too."

"*And* Randall and the others? Hey, Amy's kind of a slut. People keep asking me why you're not hitting that." Others?

"'Hitting that?' Since when do you talk like that? I like her, but she's not…human."

"Not human? When did you become so racist?"

"I just don't find her that attractive."

"It's not like you exactly have your pick of the hottest dames. Besides, I think she is actually quite striking. Pretty hot stuff, in fact."

"All right! It's really because I am painfully aware that we are not equal. Everyone else just thinks that she is a tall, odd, but not unpleasant looking woman. I *know* that she is different from the rest of us in fundamental ways. I know that her making love with me would be bestiality."

"Bestiality!? You really are racist!"

"It's *me* that's the animal, stupid!"

"So…you just have low self esteem?"

"I dunno what I have. Look, back to the subject, o.k.? All I know is that she has developed some 'process' that the Dynomex corporation is buying from her. I

don’t know what it is and there is a very real possibility that she is pulling some sort of double-cross on them. I just wish I knew what she had in mind.”

“You could just ask nicely.”

“I could, but she has good reason to believe that I might blab or try to interfere. She has *me* all figured out and I doubt I could change her mind. I’m too dumb to win an argument with her.”

I just happened to look out of Jerry’s window when a limousine with tinted windows pulled up in front of the building. “Hey, check this out.”

Jerry looked just as Klutig, wearing a smart business suit came out and got in. “Things that make you go ‘hmmmmm’.” He said.

Over the next weeks, Klutig came and went with the corporate types but was usually home for dinner. She also took on a few singing gigs that were very well received. It seemed certain that she was going to be signed by a major label sooner or later because her following both in town and on the Internet was growing. She still posed for Randall, but he was starting to look at her strangely. I think that he was figuring out that he was really a lot dumber than her and she was totally manipulating him. In the paintings, she had started to take on demonic characteristics.

In one week, things suddenly got crazy. Randall was found in his apartment having overdosed on something, the doctors weren’t sure what and he was in a coma. He woke up in two days unable to remember anything more recent six months ago. The day Randall woke up, I heard on the radio that Todd Braxton had committed suicide. Klutig was shocked, or at least acted shocked when I told her. She dressed in a suit and went to New York city where she said she was going to be for a week. It was just by chance that three days later I saw on the MSNBC website that Dynomex Corporation had installed a new VP of product development named Amy Camus!

I heaved a deep sigh and called my office to say I had to be out for a few days. Then I called Jerry and told him what had happened and that I was going to New York to see Klutig. “I’m going with you!” he said unexpectedly.

“What?”

“I want to go. She is going to have all kinds of expense accounts and we’ll get a taste of the good life! It’ll be an adventure! She’s my friend too, you know.”

I couldn’t believe this. “If you come, I don’t want to hear a word about anything I might have ‘gotten you into’, get it? This is *your* idea.”

We went down on the Amtrak the next morning. I called Dynomex from Penn Station and got Klutig’s assistant. “Miss Camus has been expecting your call. She will be more than happy to see you.”

Dynomex was located in a shiny new skyscraper a block north of Wall Street just spitting distance from where the World Trade Center once stood. Shortly after

we identified ourselves, Jerry and I were met at the desk by a short brisk young woman with a fancy tablet computer and a wireless headset through which she was apparently conversing at intervals with a number of different people. She told us her name was Katie and that we should let her know if we need anything at all. She handed me a card with her internal direct dial code on it. She led us to an elevator that took us to the 48th floor and from there across to waiting area of a large corner office where she handed us off to a drop-dead gorgeous receptionist. Jerry was frozen in place for a moment when he saw her until I tapped him on the shoulder. She led us right into the office. I found out later that this gal had once represented Israel in the Miss Universe pageant.

It was a sleek, modern room. There were large display screens on the walls and a desk that was simply a glass slab on legs that apparently had a keyboard and computer monitor built into it. There were also several comfortable looking chairs in various places. Klutig stood by the floor to ceiling window with her arms folded. She was wearing a tailored suit that exactly matched the color of her eyes and the long red wig that she had been wearing the night she met Braxton, the suicide whose job she now held. She looked every inch the power broker, but she was obviously glad to see us. "I'm so happy you came!" she said brightly.

We both gave her a hug but I stepped back still highly confused. "Klutig, what *is* all this?"

"This is what I need to fix things."

Uh-oh. "What do mean by that?"

"Jake, you're a smart person; you know that the world is broken."

"I haven't felt very smart lately. Are you saying that you think you can 'fix' the world?"

"As I'm sure you can imagine it is very hard for a person like me to resist trying. That's why I'm here; I needed the resources of a powerful corporation. I want to show you guys something." She touched a button on her desk. "Devora, alert Katie. I'm taking my guests down to seven."

The brisk young woman returned and walked a few paces ahead of us while constantly speaking into her headset. Jerry looked longingly back at the receptionist. "Devora!" He murmured.

Efficient Katie had secured the elevator for us and we were soon in a large room on the seventh floor. It was filled with massive, industrial looking equipment. There were several large super-computers standing around with a number of work stations at which various technicians labored. Klutig bent to speak into Katie's ear. She had to bend rather far because Katie only stood about five feet tall. Katie called out in a high clear voice, "Can we clear the room please? Miss Camus needs this room at the moment." Everyone walked out of the room followed by Katie who was nattering on her headset as she closed the door behind her.

“That’s quite a girl you got there.” I said.

“She drinks too much coffee. I keep her on call 24/7 and I never seem to catch her sleeping.” She pointed at something that looked like a giant piston mounted on gimbals with a platform on top of it. “This is what I wanted to show you.”

“What is it?” asked Jerry.

Suddenly, I felt cold inside. I recognized what it was. “This allows us to see time from a different angle.” Said Klutig.

“No!” I almost shouted. “Klutig, I can’t believe you are messing with this stuff!”

“Jake, some things need to be fixed. I only hold ten percent of the stock in Dynomex, but I bought out and completely liquidated the assets of Lurex, who had this under development. I wanted to make it disappear. Your people should not be playing around in the time stream.”

“Then why did you build it?” I was starting to suspect that Klutig might be a little crazy. Before my eyes she had become rich and powerful and now had control of this infernal contraption. She was like a James Bond villain.

“What the hell is it? What have you gotten me into now?” Asked Jerry.

“Hey! What did I tell you about that? You’re here of your own free will.” I stopped to take a deep breath. “It’s like the thing that brought her here, that brought me to her time. It’s incredibly dangerous!”

Klutig chuckled. “Don’t be so dramatic, Jake. You sound like you have no reason to trust me. Even the engineers who assembled this don’t know what it’s for. They believe that it is a device for controlling the position of communication satellites. It actually functions as that, but all of its systems are software adaptable to allow it move into higher dimensions.”

I was shaking my head. “No, no, no…this is no good.”

Klutig stepped close to me and laid a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t be afraid, Jake. I know that I shouldn’t try to alter the world even though the temptation is so strong. It’s better that I try to find my way home.”

“What? That’s what this is for? How can you possibly be accurate enough? You could be off by thousands of years!”

She smiled at me. “Wonderful idiot.” It was a term of endearment. “I have pinpointed the exact time and timeline that I left. The computer knows how to place me there. I have left some things for you. Some you will have immediately, others will come to you over time.”

“So, you’re just going to go? Just like that?”

“Your life will be so much simpler without me around.”

“Maybe so, but I’ll miss you terribly.”

We hugged again and she patted me on the back in a “good dog” sort of way. To my surprise, she kissed Jerry full on the lips. I watched numbly as she rapidly

tapped keys at a work station, obviously doing several unrelated things at once. Then she stepped onto the platform when it lowered to the floor. The platform rose as she waived and smiled then abruptly twisted away into some unseeable direction. A couple of seconds later it reappeared minus Klutig.

Jerry said, “Wow, there goes the best sex I ever had!”

I turned to him. “My God! Am I the only one who never slept with her?”

“Maybe.”

“Jeeze. Um, we ought to get out of here before people start asking questions.” I picked up a phone and dialed Katie’s extension.

That girl Katie is a wonder! Whoever gets her next as an executive assistant will go far. Although she hadn’t known ahead of time about Klutig’s departure, she had gotten a last minute email from her to put certain plans in action. When she arrived at the room a whole thirty seconds after I had called, she had an envelope for both Jerry and me. Mine contained about five-hundred dollars in cash, a plane ticket back to Boston and a letter.

Dear Jake,

I will always remember you and think often of how you took me into you home and treated me like a sister.

You live in an amazing world, but if I had stayed there I would have inevitably changed it in ways that your people might not have see as for the better. Strange as it seems, learning to cross the ages was the easier course to take. There are a number of ways to fix everything, but this was the one that made the most sense.

Do not fear that I return to my people bearing dangerous knowledge. I think knowing the world must be earned. I will teach my people to write and nothing more. Maybe a little more, but for the most part my people will have to make the great discoveries the same way yours did.

Don’t worry about my world so much as your own. It is a difficult place and rationality is not highly valued in it. I realize that it is not my place to change the rules of your age and indeed if I did, my own might never come to be.

There will be a legacy of me in your life. From time to time things will surface that will be of great use to you and none of them will harm you.

Katie has made reservations for you at the Plaza and you have a ticket home. Don’t stay in New York and don’t worry about being asked a lot of questions. I have covered my tracks well.

I suppose that you must have questions about Randall and Todd Braxton. Randall had become desperately unhappy. He found that he felt emasculated in our relationship and the more

I tried to help him the more unhappy he became. In the end, it just seemed better for him to forget me completely. Todd was another matter. He was aggressive and amoral. I needed him to introduce me to people at Dynomex, but he was too dangerous to actually have around after I had taken his job. I convinced him that his continued existence was a detriment to humanity. He shot himself of his own free will.

Please take good care of Bunny and tell him that I will miss him very much. Unlike me, he can make a happy life in a new world if someone just loves him enough.

Goodbye, my dear friend. I will love you always.

-Klutig Alshoin
"Amy Camus"

I was actually misting up. I really had come to love Klutig.

Braxton shot himself of his own free will? Was Klutig really *that* persuasive? Maybe. I saw that Jerry was similarly moved by his letter. Katie interrupted our respective musings. "Gentlemen, there is a car downstairs waiting to take you to the Plaza. If you have any important questions over the next day or so, feel free to call me but my employment with Miss Camus is at an end and I will be reassigned soon." With that she whisked us down an elevator and into a waiting limousine.

That evening, I sat in the hotel bar drinking Laphroaig alone. Jerry had called Katie to see if she could set him up with Devora, the hot receptionist but somehow ended up going out with Katie herself instead. I saw them briefly before they went off somewhere. She looked really different without the office clothes and headset. She was cute and perky with a really nice figure and pretty good legs for such a short girl.

I just wondered what Klutig Alshoin would bring back to her people. What parts of our civilization would she deem worthy of revival five million years after our passing?

When I got home the next day I had an email from Dave Beiderman. Apparently there had been more than fifty emails and letters from people who really wanted to see what happened next in Jungle Ranch!

Chapter two.
The Suffocating Sand

The camera pans away from the floating hat to show a hatless Kit pulling himself free of the quicksand on a vine. By the time he is

free, there is no sign of Trask. Resignedly he returns his father's body to the mining camp on the back of his horse. Trask has, of course, vanished and Dugan pretends concern over the elder Hadley's death.

Kit fires most of the staff, but keeps Dugan on while resolving to build a ranch around the diamond mine while he figures out how to make it pay off. He brings in a few hands from Montana, fondly known at home as "The Range Buddies" and they are Kit's best friends, Curley (Herman Brix), Johnny (Johnny Mack Brown) and Texas Bill (Sammy Baugh). As well, he invites wise but crusty trail cook, Pete who is never seen without his large wooden spoon (Richard Alexander). Their mission is to turn the land into a working ranch using native cattle and training native tribesmen to be cowboys.

Johnny, while teaching two natives to rope, is knocked from his horse into a river which carries him away at lightning speed. Shortly after the river has carried him out of sight of his companions, a dark figure swings over the river on a vine and ties it to his belt. Next thing he knows he is being lifted from the current into a tree where he find himself face to face with a gorilla (Charles Gemora) who is accompanied by a beautiful girl in a leopard skin, Chima (Priscilla Lawson). She is an innocent child of the forest. The Gorilla has a small leather pouch around his neck along with a wooden name-tag that says “Poggo”. He is her devoted companion. When she finds out who he is and where he comes from , she tells him about a "bad white man" who wants to make trouble for them camped farther down the river. It doesn't take much for Johnny to figure out that she is talking about Trask. She leaves Johnny on the bank of the river and she and Poggo vanish into the jungle just as the two native cowboys and Kit burst out of the bushes happy to see Johnny all right. They assume he must have hit his head when he tells them about the beautiful jungle girl. In spite of their disbelief , Kit decides to check downriver for Trask's camp, just incase. He discovers a native village with many people carrying heavy loads back and forth while Trask sits in a carved native chief's stool flanked by spear carrying warriors and wearing a diamond studded

crown. He backs away and returns with Curley, Johnny and Texas Bill with the intention of apprehending Trask and turning him over to the French Colonial authorities. Their plans are foiled, however when stealthy warriors sneak up behind them and hit them on the head. They awaken to find themselves tied to logs on which they will be set afloat on the river after enduring some gloating from Trask.

As they drift off with the current they struggle with their bonds while keeping an eye for crocodiles until they come around a bend to see the waterfall ahead. The last shot shows the logs going over the falls, which are many hundred feet high.

"I still don't get it." Said Jerry.

"Yeah, well you just aren't going to 'get' everything in this life."

5
The Mystery Computer

I

Radarman to the Rescue!
Chapter 9

Rhonda arrived back at the beach house just a few moments too late, for it was already in the process of being consumed by one of the gigantic mutants. This one looked like it might possibly have been the result of the mating of a bat and a squid which it likely was, and of course it was at least then thousand times the size of either of its parents. She decided to get back in her car and move on before the monster spotted her.

She had to review in her mind as to how her father had gotten so far out of control. Was it less than a year ago that he had been regarded as the world's greatest fertility specialist? Now he was the world's most wanted criminal and apparently not even Radarman could find him. Rhonda's father had searched for the solution that would allow childless couples to finally achieve their dream of parenthood. Not only did he seek to give them babies, but big healthy babies. She comforted herself with the notion that he probably didn't expect his serum to enable the mating of any two organisms regardless of sex or species or that the offspring would always grow at least as big as a house. Least of all, she prayed he had no idea that these creatures would hunger for human flesh exclusively and have an instinctive desire to smash cities. Even if he didn't know these things, it seemed careless of him to have simply poured his samples down the sink.

She was forced from her reflections and off the road by a rampaging Grasshopper-mouse the size of an airliner that was tearing its way into a shopping mall and hundreds of people fled in mindless terror. The grasshopper-mouse was briskly gobbling up the slower ones. The pokey little Ford Escort wasn't going to be a solid or swift enough vehicle. She saw a Hummer parked in the mall lot and ran toward it. Since she had been forced to change cars so frequently in the last few weeks, her skills were well honed and she had the Humm-vee hot-wired in mere seconds. She had to get back to Waterbury, if there still was a Waterbury and find Jim! He was the only person who knew how to contact Radarman.

Since the mutants had eaten most of the army, Radarman was the only force in the world that could confront these creatures successfully. Even that mighty being, however, might not be able to prevent more from being born. Rhonda sped off between two of the grasshopper-mouse's six furry legs with the gas pedal to the floor.

In Waterbury, Jim Baskin had run to the roof of the Star-Sentinel building to get a better view of the city. Four immense bunnyhogs were working their way up 19th street although one of them had stopped to do battle with a gorillachicken that had resulted in the complete destruction of Oddfellows hall. Thankfully, most of the people had been evacuated from that part of town so most of the creatures were just sniffing around. He wished his car had not been destroyed by the manduck. The bizarre catholicity of sexual attraction had not effected him as it had the rest of nature, so it was difficult for him to imagine having the sort of desires that would lead to the conception of such a creature as nature now suddenly seems to allow. He assumed that his microwave charged blood was not susceptible to the same malign influences.

He had to protect the city! He touched his ring and spoke the word. "KLYSTRON!!!!" He was surrounded by the familiar energetic discharge that altered his very atoms and where once had stood an ordinary science teacher was now the astounding RADARMAN! He leapt from

the roof held aloft by the power of Radion energy and he scanned the horizon with a powerful radar field. As he found the mutant that was closest to him, a sixty foot tall rosebush-dog. The creature was loathsome beyond description and Radarman was consumed with disgust. He directed a stream of microwaves at the heart of the creature which barked and whined and fell over onto a gasoline truck that exploded upon impact sending flaming petals everywhere. The superhero moved on the next mutant, a snailgiraffe, and was about to engage it in battle when he spotted the red Hummer making its way up Industrial Parkway. Flying high over the city, Radarman scanned the vehicle and, to his horror, discovered that the driver was Rhonda! He dove down to street level and landed in front of the car which slowed to a stop. Rhonda leapt out of the car and ran toward him.

"Radarman! Thank God!"

"Rhond….er, Miss Grant! Why are you here? It's simply not safe!"

"I need your help, Jim Baskin is somewhere in Waterbury! We were separated when a squirellswan destroyed the TV studio in Oakville!"

"Jim is safe, Miss Grant. I got him out of here."

"Where is he? I must find him!"

The electromagnetic paladin hesitated for just a second. "He is in a secret lab working on an antidote to the fertility serum. In the meantime, I'm trying to find your father and save as many lives as I can." Yet again, Radarman wondered why he kept up the charade of a double life. Rhonda was his fiancée after all, but he still harbored the fear that she would consider him a freak if she knew.

His musings were interrupted by an awful roar from the snailgiraffe as it crawled toward them along the highway. From the opposite direction came a mushroomcow. Radarman picked up Rhonda and lifted into the sky just as the two hideous mutants collided. With his left hand, he sent a blast of microwaves against them and something strange took place. The two evil beasts vibrated and then seemed to liquefy and flow into one another forming a towering mound of raw protoplasm. Then the mound started to bud off pieces that were living

creatures having the characteristics of both mutants. In mere seconds there was a herd of mushroomcowgiraffesnails milling about and rapidly increasing in size. "This is an unanticipated development." Said Radarman.

"I'll say! I have my father's notebooks, but they're in the car in the middle of all those mutants."

"I have to go and get them!" Radarman flew Rhonda to the top of an office building and left her there safe for the moment and then headed back to the Hummer. He hovered over it and heated the air under it with a microwave beam slowly lifting the car into the air. Once it was high enough, he pushed it through the air to the top of the building where he had left Rhonda.

In an office in the abandoned building, the super hero and the science reporter went over the books to see what they could find out.

"This is astonishing!", Said Radarman, "According to this, the creatures we have encountered are only the beginning! The serum has effected all life on a molecular level. As of now any living species has been enabled to produce young with any other living species, and that is quite bizarre enough, but the serum will soon be affecting things on the sub-molecular level! When that happens, living things will be able to produce offspring with inanimate objects!"

Rhonda was perplexed. "Inanimate? You mean a frog could successfully mate with a saxophone, for instance?"

"Precisely! And it won't end there. The serum is designed to also act at the *conceptual* level!"

"Pardon?"

"A living thing or a non-living thing will be able to produce young with abstract concepts!"

"Huh? Do you mean that we could see a hybrid of a footstool and justice? A hamster and algebra? A dog and doggedness? "

"And each and every one of them hungering for human flesh! Terrifying, eh? This *must* be stopped! The entire universe is

threatened if there is a general breakdown in the differences between one thing and another."

Rhonda had imagined many ways in which the world might come to an end, but this had not been one of them. They both sat for a moment in silence when suddenly, the window exploded inward.

Dave slapped the manuscript down on his desk top. "Are you serious? I mean are you just going to write stuff for five-year-olds for the rest of your life?" He had never liked this particular vein in my work, but he kept buying it because readers seemed to enjoy it. My ex-roommate had primed the pump a bit with the letters to the editor but there were a bunch of legit ones as well.

"I always wanted to grow up to be a '30's pulp novelist, but I was born too late."

"I think you do this isolated chapter thing as just a cheap device so that you don't have to write things with a beginning, middle and an end, or even have to make much sense."

"So what's your point?" I smirked.

He frowned. "Don't be such a wise-ass. I'm trying to give you some career advice here."

"Hey, I gave you the rat story, didn't I?" That had been a tough one to write. I didn't come off looking all that good in it and it was based on an experience that still gave me the occasional nightmare. "Look, are you gonna run it or not?" I could afford to be a little flippant with him because I didn't need the money and I was posting most stuff on my website.

The truth is that I had lots of time to write now because I didn't have to work for a living anymore. I received a check for six thousand dollars the first business day of every month from a trust fund that had been set up by the aforementioned ex-roommate, a remarkable woman named Klutig Alshoin, known to the world as "Amy Camus." She had visited our age from the fifty-thousandth century or so. While deciding if she wanted to rule the world or simply go home, she made a lot of money, all of which is now in a foundation that, among *many* other things, sends me money.

Dave looked at me with a slight curl of his lip. "Yeah, I'll run it, but this stuff is getting tired. You really ought to stretch yourself as writer, work outside your comfort zone."

"My whole career is based on being a hack. Why mess with a good thing?" This was stupid. I was just taunting him for the pure pleasure of it.

“Yeah, yeah. I know, but you have so many good stories in you. You don’t have to do this stuff.”

I could have gone back and forth with him all afternoon, but what was the point? I split and let him get on with his day.

When I got home, Bunny was singing and dancing along with the mystery computer.

Hey my cakewalking ragtime baby!
Come on give me a whirl,
I know you won’t say maybe,
‘cause you’re a modern kind of girl!

The “Mystery Computer” used to belong to Klutig. I didn’t know the password to log onto it and its operating system had been so hacked and modified that I didn’t know how to work it even if I could. She had made a special screen-saver to entertain Bunny and he got sulky when I turned it off so I just left it on for him. It is connected to the Internet and seems to be a server of some sort with its own account paid for by the Camus Foundation, Whenever I turn it off, I get a polite call from the IT guy at the foundation asking me to turn it back on.

Bunny is an alien half animal/half plant monster from another dimension that happens to be my pet and he *loves* ragtime. More about him a little later.

Klutig had now been gone for four months, but she was still a force in many lives. Shortly after she vanished from our world, her CD was released and a couple of videos of her performing became an Internet phenomenon. She had a remarkable voice that was capable of sounds no other person could make and had a range of over eight octaves. Her sudden rise to corporate power and even more sudden disappearance made her into a much discussed cult figure. Theories abounded about where she went ranging from being rubbed out by the Mafia to kidnap by aliens. The idea that she might have traveled five million years into the future to rejoin her tribe of super-intelligent cave-people was *not* among the popular speculations. In this case truth is so much stranger than fiction that no one even considered it. The Camus Foundation denies *all* rumors equally. I was unaware if they had been actually made privy to the truth about Amy.

My friend Jerry actually has a better connection with the Camus Foundation than I do. They also pay him a monthly stipend like me and he has an on again, off again relationship with the foundation’s Chief Operating Officer, Katie Babcock. She was only twenty-four years old and had gotten the job because she had been Klutig’s executive assistant at Dynomex Corporation. She’s a cute little blonde with a boundless energy that tends to drive Jerry a little nuts because she just

doesn't slow down. He'll break it off with her for a while, but he always goes back. He says that the sex is fantastic and that she will do *anything* in bed. I'll bet it is; she certainly seems enthusiastic enough.

Bunny continued to sing and soft-shoe in the living room while I checked my email. Aside from several messages from people I didn't know who thought my penis was either too small or too limp, there was a notice from Janine, Katie's secretary at the Foundation that Katie would like me to drop by the next day. The Camus Foundation kept its headquarters in New Haven, but I wasn't worried about how I was going to get there. Katie always sends a car when she wants to see me or Jerry. In my case it was usually about some reference in the many digital pages of notes for the Foundation left behind by "Amy Camus." In Jerry's case, the occasion was usually a "nooner."

The Katie Babcock that I met in her office in New Haven was different from the woman I first met working for Dynomex as Klutig's assistant. For one thing, she wasn't buzzing around like a worker bee and constantly talking into a headset. For another, she was dressed a lot better. Every inch of her diminutive frame looked the perfect executive. She even wore heels that brought her up to a full five-foot-two. She offered me coffee which I accepted and then got right to the point. "Some one has been logging onto Amy's computer at your place."

"No way. No one I know knows the password. Why, is something wrong?"

"That machine contains all of Miss Camus' original research or links to where she had saved it on various servers around the world. All of that material is the intellectual property of the Camus Foundation and we are more than a little worried that some of it might get out."

"Well, it's not me."

"I never thought it was you."

"Then who?"

"Bunny."

"You're crazy. I don't think that Bunny is even as intelligent as a chimp."

"Amy taught him to sing and dance, maybe she also taught him to do simple things with the computer."

I was highly puzzled to say the least. Bunny certainly came from a race of beings that were the intellectual equal of humans, but he had bad genetics being the product of a same sex mating. Bunny was a buju and bujus can do that but it wasn't exactly eugenic. That alone was sufficient to ensure low intelligence, and adding that to having been raised in the alien conditions of Earth made him a less than exemplary specimen of his species. He was a dwarf stunted both physically and mentally. "I *really* doubt that."

“Internet logs show that the user has been investigating bujus, Moof and Air Force records on the Buju War. The user has also managed to hack into the files on the home computer belonging to Dr. Charles Hines.”

“Charlie!”

Katie raised an eyebrow. “So you know Dr. Hines?”

“Yeah. You never read my piece in the Cambridge Invasion?”

“I really don’t have much time for Sunday supplement stuff. I saw Lauren Vrabec’s report on it on the *This Morning Show*. It was an amazing piece of investigative reporting!” I had been instrumental in exposing the Air Force’s secret war against Bunny’s home world with the sometimes willing cooperation of Charlie Hines and the consistently reluctant help of local tv newswoman, Lauren Vrabec. In the end, Charlie had accused me of destroying what little was left of his reputation. Lauren went on to get a plum job with the network. I was not currently on good terms with either one of them.

I ground my teeth only a little as I said,” I’ll fax you a copy.” I guess I was going to have to attempt to have a deep discussion with Bunny even though I had previously thought that he was utterly incapable of such a thing. “Maybe we should just unplug the Mystery Computer from the internet.”

“Mystery Computer?”

“Amy’s computer.”

“I don’t know if that will be a solution. Bunny might gain access somewhere else that we won’t be able to track him.”

“Just how smart do you think he is, anyway?”

“We don’t know, but keeping an eye on his activities seems like the best course of action. Do us a favor and don’t alter how you relate to Bunny for the time being.”

Suspicion, just what I needed to make my life perfect. Sheesh. How was I supposed to pretend when I thought Bunny was way smarter than he apparently pretended to be? Was I really being made a fool of by a singing houseplant?

When I got home, I found bunny singing along with the Mystery Computer.

I want hear the coyotes howlin'
while the sun sets in the west
I want to be a cowboy's sweetheart
In the land I love the best

By the time I remembered what came next, it had already started, Bunny was *yodeling*. This sound was disconcerting enough coming from a human being, but in Bunny’s bizarre, buzzy voice it was truly disquieting and strange. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. Every dog in the neighborhood

started barking and my upstairs neighbor started pounding on the floor. “Allright, alright!” I shouted and then to Bunny, “Shut the hell up!”

Bunny jumped. He hadn’t heard me come in and I didn’t usually yell at him. “Hi Jake!” he said in a jittery voice. “What’s up?”

“You’re giving the heebie-jeebies to the whole neighborhood is what’s up! No more yodeling!”

He jumped up and down merrily singing “Heebie-jeebies! Heebie-jeebies!”

“Knock it off! You’re gonna get me evicted one of these days! Just pick a quieter song, o.k.?”

“O.k., Jake!” Within a couple of minutes he was happily crooning *You made me love you* while prancing around the room like some insanely misshapen parody of Fred Astair.

I went into the kitchen and poured myself two fingers of Bruichladdich over an ice cube and stared into space as I pondered what Katie had told me. Bunny sure didn’t *seem* too smart. He could repeat song lyrics and use about a hundred words properly, but a talented parrot could do that. There is no way he could do research on the internet. No way. Period. Something else was going on.

That evening I was caught up watching a particularly good episode of MYTHBUSTERS. Adam and Jamie were taking on the idea of building a nuclear weapon from plans found on the internet. They managed to build and test all of the electronic and mechanical components easily enough and built a facility for handling the Plutonium that Grant, Tory and Kari were busy trying to obtain from a shady character with strange tattoos called “Lev” in Uzbekistan. They had just settled on an undisclosed cash amount plus a “personal service” from Kari when I was interrupted by a strange sound from the other room.

The Mystery Computer was spewing out a string of odd noise to that Bunny was listening with rapt attention. It suddenly struck me that what I was hearing was Klutig Alshoin’s native language! Bunny reached over to the keyboard with one of his bracts and hit a couple of keys. Suddenly the weird interface of Klutig’s computer came up and several working windows were flashing with rapid-fire data. Uh-oh. “Hey, Bunny!” I said. He must have jumped three feet. I guess he thought that the sound was high enough on the TV that I wouldn’t notice what he was up to. “What are you doing?”

“Talk to Jake…lady Jake.”

For some reason, Bunny could not assign more than one personal name. His whole species was like that, so he called everyone “Jake.” When he said “lady Jake” he meant Klutig. “Klutig isn’t here anymore. That’s just her computer.”

“She’s in it, Jake. Lady Jake is in it.”

This was a weird assertion even coming from Bunny. “I’m sorry, Bunny, but Klutig is gone. She isn’t in the computer.”

"Is." He sounded so firm.

"How did you log onto to it anyway?" I wasn't really expecting a coherent answer.

The answer came from the computer, not Bunny. "I showed him how." The voice was very similar to Klutig's, but clearly synthesized. Holy shit! "Klutig?"

"Not really. I'm an artificial intelligence running on the Camus Foundation server. I contain sort of a hologram of part of Klutig Alshoin's mind. The computer isn't really powerful enough to reproduce her personality well."

"What are you doing with Bunny?"

"Just entertaining him. Nothing sinister." There was a very realistic ironic smirk in its voice.

I needed another drink. I went into the living room to pour some more scotch. On the TV, Adam and Jamie were wearing dark goggles as hellfire exploded on the Black Rock desert. A remote camera recorded "Buster" being vaporized a split second before it went offline. Damn, it worked…myth plausible.

When I came back, Bunny was showing some dance steps to the computer. I interrupted them. "Katie had me down to her office to ask questions about Bunny using the computer. I swore to her that it was impossible. Why didn't you let me in on this?"

"It took a while for the artificial intelligence to mature and this local machine exists pretty much just to keep Bunny company. When you came in, I directed more resources to it. We could have a better conversation at the foundation headquarters. Why don't you come down tomorrow? You can bring Jerry too. We will send a car."

"Does Katie know about you?"

"A little. She thinks I'm just clever software, which I am, but she doesn't know exactly how clever."

Bunny was jumping from one foot to the other like a four-year-old who has to pee. "Sing! Sing!"

"You had better let me finish with Bunny. The car will come tomorrow around noon."

I just left the room. It's amazing how used to stuff like this I had become.

"…and remember," said the television, "don't try this at home, ever. We're professionals."

From the other room came crooning by the little monster from another universe.

"Every cloud must have a silver lining
Wait until the sun shines through …"

Jeez…

II

Jerry was already in the limo when I got there. There were nice sandwiches and cold beers for us in the car, which was pretty considerate of the Foundation seeing as they scheduled us for lunchtime.

I asked Jerry, “So, you got a call, I take it?”

“An email signed ‘Amy Camus’! What gives?”

“Bunny has been logging onto the Mystery Computer and talking with an artificial intelligence that is based on Klutig.”

“Since when can Bunny use a computer?”

“Oy! Don’t get me started! Bottom line is we should get the lowdown on everything when we get to the Foundation.”

“Fair enough. Hey, ya wanna hear something weird?”

“You got something *I* would consider weird? By all means, lay it on me!”

“I had a dream that I was on a city bus, but I didn’t recognize the city I was in. It was all modernistic with spindly towers and monorails that ran through tubes up in the air. There were really sleek zeppelins and rocketships and people with jetpacks all over the place. A lot of people on the street rode things that looked like a combination of a bicycle and a surfboard that glided a few inches off the ground. The whole thing looked like ‘40’s science fiction art or maybe the bottle city of Kandor.”

“Wow!”

“‘Wow’ is right, pal! But you wanna know what the *real* weird thing was?”

“Hit me.”

“All of the decorations and clothing on people had sort of African motifs. Like all of the shirts were kind of like dashikis and all the men wore those little African style hats. All the buildings were painted in these bright colors! You don’t realize how much gray and tan dominate our urban landscape until you see what it would be like with bright red or green buildings! Anyway, I didn’t know where the hell I was so I went up to the driver to ask him and when I get there I recognize him as Sun Ra! He is wearing that chain mail cap and a gold cape and instead of a steering wheel there is an electronic keyboard like an electric piano or a synth or something! I realize that what I had thought was the sounds of the traffic all around us was actually coming from him! He was making them all on the keyboard! I blew my mind! I said, ‘Where the hell are we, man?’ He said ‘Take a look’ and reached over and pulled up a window shade that I now realized had simply had the

scene outside *painted* on it! Outside the real window was the same futuristic city in bombed out ruins. 'It's after the end of the world, don't you know that yet?' He said. He handed me a banana and a tambourine and kicked me out the door. I wandered the rubble strewn streets until I came upon a pile of Hostess Twinkies that where alive and all started talking to me at once beseeching me not to eat them and making claims that they were poison, had razor blades hidden in them or were political prisoners of conscience and other shit like that. I wasn't fooled and proceeded to gorge myself until I woke up. Weird, huh?"

"Yep, that's pretty weird. What do you think it means?"

"I dunno. I don't think most dreams mean anything in particular, they're just leftover images from our waking lives. Some people think they are the mental equivalent of the thin film left in the glass after you drank all the milk. Then again, they could be television from another dimension."

"Sometimes I think that myself, but my dreams are dull, while yours are rich and detailed and seem to be steeped in symbolism."

"Symbolism? What do you think could have possibly been symbolic about that dream?"

I had to pause to gather my thoughts, and then I said, "The bus is life, the life of a human being. What he sees out the window is his internal perception of the outside world, perhaps some sort of idealization of the world. Some people would be tempted to say that the driver is God, but I would tend to identify him with the various people who set themselves up as guides in the lives of individuals. Parents, clergymen, politicians, bosses, etcetera. In the end, these people are revealed to be showing a false vision of the world and then cruelly abandon us to it, kicking us out into it with only a metaphoric banana and tambourine, they represent concepts like religion or patriotism, items of dubious utility in dealing with the world's harsh realities."

Jerry grinned indulgently. "What about the Twinkies?"

"The Twinkies are the millions of mixed messages that we are given in life. Some things are poison but claim to be nourishing, some are nourishing, but we think they are poison, but we can only really know by eating the Twinkie."

"But aren't Twinkies basically poison anyway?"

"That's the thing! These claims mask the fact that it's *all* poison!"

"Wow, that's a darker interpretation than I expected."

"Hey, I'm moody and complex."

"Bullshit. You're happy and simple."

"Yeah, ya got me there. Is there any more beer?"

We made good time and were in New Haven by around quarter of two. Katie met us outside. Apparently things had been happening that they had not been completely prepared for at the Foundation. "We are perplexed to say the least and

hoped that you guys could shed some light on recent events." It was such a curiously neutral statement. It was as if it had been carefully crafted to require the most information while revealing as little as possible.

"That's a curiously neutral statement." I said. "It's almost as if it had been carefully crafted to require the most information while revealing as little as possible."

As Katie led us out of the lobby into a wing of the building I had never been in, she said. "I'm sorry. I'm so used to talking to the press. The mainframe computers carry software that was designed by Miss Camus as does the desktop you have in your apartment. There has been increased automatic interaction between the machines including yours. The ones here are connected with prototyping equipment."

"What do you mean, 'prototyping equipment'?" Asked Jerry.

"Sort of like printers, but they can produce parts in three dimensions. They are in light plastic, but they can be used to make molds. We have learned that the computers occasionally produce useful things on their own. We had assumed that they were made from stored templates, but they have become increasingly complex."

"How complex?" I asked.

Katie opened a door and ushered us in. "You be the judge." She said.

What looked like a spindly man with a skull for a head in a suit of ivory colored plastic armor stood up from a chair and said "Great! You were able to come!" It was thin, a little too thin in places. This was no human in a suit; it was a robot, an incredibly advanced one. It strode toward us with a hand extended. Its motions were as fluid as that of a real person. "Welcome both of you!" It said as it shook both me and Jerry's hand. Its hand was cool and resilient on the back side and textured and rubbery on the palm side. The voice was well modulated and female in tone, but the pronunciation was imperfect.

I said to Katie. "It acts like it knows us."

The robot said. "I'm a *she* not an *it* and you can talk directly to *me* and yes, I do know you. I am an analog of Amy Camus, I just don't have my skin yet." Indeed not. What a face! Aside from cheeks made from some sort of stretchy material, it was basically a skull made from a large number of plastic parts put together with an uncountable number of tiny nylon screws, but the teeth and the inside of the mouth cosmetically resembled that of a living human. Similarly, the astonishingly natural looking eyes were set in their sockets in a moist looking pink rubbery substance. The skull-like surface was dotted with numerous shiny gold contacts and was penetrated here and there with a number of small sockets apparently designed to fit various cables. I would soon learn that there was more yet to be connected. It wasn't that easy to understand when it spoke. There was a

bothersome clicking when the teeth made contact and I couldn't tell the difference between its "b", "p", "d", "t" sounds. The number of plugs and contacts on the face suggested that a lot of the mechanism involved in articulate speech we contained in the skin that was yet to come.

"Klutig? No way!" The robot was a good deal shorter than the real Klutig who had been around six foot four. This humanoid mechanism was more the size of a typical human woman, about five foot seven.

"'Klutig?' What's 'Klutig'?" Asked Katie.

She didn't know. Interesting. "Long story. Maybe later."

Katie said. "*Definitely* later. The computer prototyped all of the parts and printed assembly instructions unprompted about ten days ago. She started talking as soon as the core systems were installed. Requested to see you guys right away. We had to get the skin molded out of town, but it should be here today."

I asked the Amy-bot, "Should she know everything?"

"I was planning on telling her."

I paused for a few seconds to gather my thoughts. Weirder and weirder. "So…an, um…android."

The Amy-bot's eyes met mine. They were eerily human although lidless save for a thin flicking metal bar that I guessed a lid of skin was intended to be attached to. They were green as Klutig's had been. I noticed that the pupils dialated in response to different light levels. "Gynoid." It said.

"Eh?"

"Gynoid. I'm a female."

"Right."

"Fully functional."

"You can have children?" Asked Jerry incredulously.

The Amy-bot laughed. It was a perfectly realistic sound. It pointed to its lower abdomen which was a "six-pack" of interlocking gray plastic plates. "Not out of *here* of course, but I can make others. When everything is properly installed, I will, however, be able to fuck."

At this point Katie blushed to a deep crimson and giggled nervously. "Wow!" She said. "This is all new to us too. She is full of surprises."

Jerry nodded his head and smiled. "Coolsville!" He said.

I was a little exasperated. I definitely recognized Klutig's personality in the robot. I seriously had doubts that anyone would be tempted into erotic contact with this thing. "Now I know that you are not just a complicated sex toy."

"Of course not, I am just intended to be as much like a real human being as possible. I can eat too."

"Really. What happens to the food?"

“I use it as fuel, just like you. I make poo, but it’s not like your poo. More like ash.”

Katie said, “You ought to see the mechanism. It alone is good for about forty patents! It takes any organic material and efficiently produces energy from it without pollution!”

“Really?”

“A small amount of carbon dioxide and methane, but my farts will never be as bad as yours.”

“Hey!” I protested. Jerry started to laugh. “Shadup, you.”

“It knows you, alright!” Said Jerry. He asked Katie, “So when the computer tells you to make something, you just do it?”

“Why not? Every thing that Miss Camus ever came up with made money. This machine contains a huge number of technological advances and it’s not even finished yet! The Foundation is a non-profit, but we will soon be setting up corporation that will start manufacturing products based on Miss Camus’ work and it will change *everything*.”

“Really.” I said. “Katie, are you really a business mogul?”

“*I* am.” Said the gynoid.

“You’re going to put the robot in charge?”

Katie looked a bit uncomfortable. “The mainframe computer has been the architect of all of our business plans anyway. The robot is just its humanoid interface. I’m still as in charge as I ever was, but really all I ever did was carry out what the computer outlined.”

The robot bent to put itself eye to eye with Katie. “I’m a *person* damn it, not an interface. I’m also your boss.” It said.

We were still there that afternoon when the skin arrived in a big wooden crate. There were actually three of them so there would be replacements on hand. They were packaged for shipping on inflatable plastic forms and I wasn’t as impressed with their appearance as I had expected to be. They looked like they were made of something that looked like silicone rubber and were oddly yellowish, like the skin of a corpse.

When the one that was to be used was prepared, it was turned inside out through the mouth opening that was amply stretchy for the task and I saw that there were a number of plugs and cable connectors on the inside. This was not merely a passive rubber suit.

The robot was helped by two technicians as the skin was first rolled over the feet. I noted that they had five toes with nicely pedicured looking nails. There were a number of small cable connections that were made as the skin was applied. It took over two hours of slowly pulling the skin over the robot’s body and plugging the robot or the skin into various pieces of test equipment along the way before the

entire thing was in place and finally, there it stood complete. I really should say there *she* stood because now the being that stood before me was very obviously female. I guess beauty really is skin deep. She did resemble what Klutig Alshoin might have looked like if she had been a member of the species *homo sapiens.* Once attached to the robot, the skin took on a more natural color, in this case sort of a light "Hispanic" brown that pretty much exactly matched the color that Klutig had been. She had been given wavy chestnut hair cut shoulder length. The facial features suggested some sort of Mediterranean type. She appeared to be about thirty years old. Had I seen her in the street, I might have guessed she was Lebanese.

She was really very attractive and of course, naked, very, very naked. It was so strange because it seemed like the last couple of hours had been spent "clothing" her and *now* she looked naked. I was for some reason made rather uncomfortable by that. I had gotten used to Klutig's casual nudity sort of by knowing that she wasn't exactly human. This machine was arguably far less human than Klutig, but her nudity seemed far more distracting. She *looked* like a nude human woman. I couldn't help blushing as I asked Katie, "Don't you have any clothes for her?"

"What is your hurry?!" asked Jerry. "She isn't *cold* and she's very nice to look at!"

"You're embarrassed?" asked the Amy-bot as she smiled prettily.

"Yeah. I'm a little embarrassed. You really look a lot like a real person."

She frowned. "I *am* a real ***person***. I'm not a real ***human***."

That didn't help. I wasn't prepared for that one. "I didn't mean to offend…" I stammered.

Jerry just started laughing. "Wow! It's so nice to see things turned around a bit. *I'm* the one who usually overloads on the weirdness."

Amy-bot said, "Actually, I am a bit cold. The skin gives me tactile sensation."

"We have something for her." said Katie and the robot was soon dressed in a pair of jeans, running shoes and a t-shirt with a Camus Foundation logo on the breast. I could tell that I was still going to be a bit uncomfortable until they found a bra for her. Jesus! When did I become such a prude?

She didn't look absolutely one-hundred percent human. If she were to stand perfectly still she would have looked like a very good wax museum display. At rest, her face seemed a bit doll-like, but in animated conversation it was easy to forget the slight deficiencies of her appearance. There were even color changes, slight flushing or blanching that we usually barely notice in others, but adds so much to the humanity of our features. I suppose that is what the active elements in the skin were for.

Jerry asked, "So, do you have super powers? Can you lift up a truck or fly?"

The Amy-bot laughed. “No, I can’t fly. I’m as strong as a healthy athletic woman but a little more damage resistant. That’s a good thing because I’m not self repairing like a human. If my skin gets more than a minor cut, it needs to be carefully repaired and depending on where that happens, it could be a complicated job. The skin on my hands and feet is highly reinforced to minimize that necessity. I can function for a long time without breathing. I only use air to speak and catalyze food. I can run for many hours just on my internal batteries. I can use anything organic for fuel.”

Katie said “Those batteries, by the way, will also make a fortune for the new corporation. High output and very little waste heat. We are going to be bigger than Microsoft and General Motors put together!”

The Amy-bot continued. “I can change the color of my skin at will.” She demonstrated this first by lightening to a Nordic light pink and then darkening to almost black giving her a south Indian appearance. “Or something more exotic.” She became first a blazing day-glow yellow and then an ultramarine blue. Suddenly, there were animated stars and fireworks on her face and just as suddenly it reverted to its normal coloring.

I said. “I think that qualifies as a ‘super power’ Jerry.”

Jerry gawked silently.

The Amy-bot said. “I am independent from the mainframe computer, but I can connect with it automatically from wherever I can find a satellite.”

I was a bit curious about the color changes. “Why can you do the skin thing?”

“I’m a product, or rather; this type of robot is a potential product.”

“But you are an intelligent being, a person, so you claim.”

“We don’t intend to market the technology in this form. The market model will be far less autonomous and not have an ego and we’re going to lease them, not sell them. We do, however want them to be adaptable to the customer’s taste. Other models will be able to change height and girth to some degree.”

Uh-oh. “That’s why you have the ability to have sex.”

Katie was indignant. “Jake! We are *not* going to manufacture robot whores!”

The Amy-bot said, “Why not, Katie? We could make them perform all kinds of services. Having sex with one would be no less moral than masturbation.”

There was a *lot* of Klutig in this creation. “Would having sex with *you* be masturbation?” I asked.

“No,” said Amy-bot, “but I have a personality.”

“Or an amazing simulation of one.”

The robot looked truly offended. “How do you know *your* personality isn’t just a simulation?” Was that a *tear* I saw at the corner of her eye? Surely she wasn’t doing that just for rhetorical effect, was she?

Jerry jumped in. “All right, let’s not have this get all heated. Jake, you see something sinister in everything!”

Amy-bot said, “This *body* is a product, but my mind is a direct model of Klutig Alshoin’s.”

Katie asked, “What in the hell are Klutig Alshoins?”

I spoke quietly to Katie. “Can we get the technical staff to leave the room for a bit?”

“I think they’re done for the time being, sure.” She asked the techs to take a break and then Jerry and I along with the Amy-bot told her the whole story. A lot of it had her looking *very* skeptical, especially the part about the duplicate me from the future. “This all sounds like a science fiction movie. A bad one.” She said.

“Look around you, Katie!” I gestured toward the Amy-bot “Doesn’t *this* look like science fiction?”

She looked at the Amy-bot. “Amy Camus came from five-million years in the future?”

“Klutig Alshoin did. *I* am Amy Camus. I have a version of Klutig’s personality and a great deal of her memory, but I can’t really think like she did. My brain is more like yours. I couldn’t invent something like me from scratch. I can’t even pronounce her native language or sing like her. Anything that Klutig learned before she left, I know, but anything I learn new I have to either have loaded from the computer or I will have to learn the way you people do.”

“So that’s what you want us to call you,” I asked, “Amy Camus?”

“Yes. Why? What were you planning on calling me?”

“I was thinking of you as ‘Amy-bot’.”

There was eye rolling all around the room. “Just ‘Amy’ is fine.”

Katie set Jerry and me up in a hotel near the Yale campus. Around ten P.M. I became aware of Jerry and Katie having noisy sex in the room next door and decided to go down to the bar. The sounds of lovemaking in themselves are not so bothersome, but Katie was getting very high pitched, just short of something only a dog can hear.

Once I had a dram of Lagovulin in front of me, I was able to properly ponder the day’s events. I realized that I had to stop thinking of the Amy-bot as an *it* rather than a *she*. I also had to stop thinking of her as Amy-bot rather than just Amy. As if I had somehow conjured her, she walked through the door, all made up and in a short black cocktail dress with stiletto heels. Oh, yeah…definitely a she. She waived and came over.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

She planted a kiss on my right cheek. Her lips were only slightly warmer than room temperature. “I wanted to talk with you in private. You’re my best friend.”

“I was Klutig’s best friend.”

“You’ll be mine too, just you wait and see. I really want to help you understand that I am a person.”

“That takes a real leap of imagination, Amy. I have seen you in two incarnations and in both you have been like no one else in the world.”

“You make that sound like something bad. Are you going to buy me a drink or what?”

“Huh? Klutig never drank much. Alcohol didn’t affect her.”

“Me either, but I like the social interaction that comes with it. Don’t get off the subject. Is it a bad thing that I’m unique?”

I waived to the bartender. “Give the lady whatever she wants.” Amy ordered a vodka martini. “Of course there is nothing wrong with the fact that you are unique, it’s just that my life seems to be one of increasing chaos. You just represent something new and strange and with each new, strange thing, I become more inclined to seek the normal and comfortable.”

“Oh yeah, this is all about Jake Zimmer.” She replied sarcastically.

“No, no. I don’t think it’s all about me, but I do sort of feel like an innocent victim of circumstance. I thought that I was leading a sort of fun, non-conformist kind of life, then weird things started happening to me. The more that weird things happen, the more I feel like I just wish things were normal. Life is turning me into an uptight conservative. Before you know it I’ll be wearing suits and going to church on Sunday.”

“You think you want that, but why do you dream of the extraordinary? Why do you write science fiction if you are not at least a little xenophilic?”

“Dreaming of going to Mars from one’s armchair is not the same thing as going to Mars. One is a harmless recreation and the other a lengthy ordeal in which one’s life hangs in the balance every second.”

“Being the president of our new corporation would not be quite so dangerous.”

“Me?! Don’t be stupid! I’m no business man, I’m barely a writer.”

“I may not have the mental gifts of the original Klutig, but I’m not stupid. I will run the nuts and bolts of the day to day business, but a human being is needed to have the appearance of being at the helm.” She looked into my eyes earnestly. God, she was lovely! A lovely plastic doll, I reminded myself.

“So, I would just be the public face of the corporation?”

“That and draw a comfortable salary. I don’t want a typical ‘business’ type. You have just the right eccentric look, not representing the stodgy old guard, but not flakey either.”

I had to stop and think for a moment. “Just exactly how ‘comfortable’ are we talking here?”

It was late so she came up to my room for the night to work at my laptop while I slept, at least that's what she told me. As soon as she got through the door, she shed her dress the way Klutig used to.

"No." I said. "Please keep your clothes on."

"Why? It never used to bother you. Not much at least. I prefer to relax unclothed."

"That's so weird. Why should it feel different to you? Do you have sensation?"

"More than you think. Come on and touch me."

I walked over to her and she extended her arm. "Just run your hand along it. I stroked her upper arm and was surprised to see her get goosebumps. "Wow! I didn't think that was technologically possible. How is that done?"

"The skin has a lot of nanomechanical elements. Try this." Before I could stop her, she grabbed my wrist and placed my hand on her breast. It was a good one, a healthy bit more than a handful and felt quite real except for the lower temperature. Her nipple became stiff under my palm and I snatched my hand away. That bit of design went well beyond simply simulating the human shape.

"Please get dressed." I said as I turned away trying to hide a swelling erection, but she caught sight of the tentpole in my pants.

"You see, you must think I'm at least a little bit human."

"Some of my body parts seem to think you are. Whatever. I'm going to bed. Do you sleep?"

"Only if I want to. Tonight I'll stay up and type a business plan. Tomorrow we get started."

"I haven't said that I would do it yet."

"Logic dictates that you will. I know you; you would never trust this technology out in the world without having at least *some* influence over it."

I laughed. "No one is ever going to believe you're a real woman if you insist on being logical!"

I woke up in the morning with Amy spooned against my back, thankfully fully clothed. She actually felt more or less like a real woman having picked up some heat from me. I was taken a little off guard, but I just relaxed and went back to sleep. Hell, I was going to be a millionaire by noon. I decided to get people working on having the artificial skin produce heat. I found Amy's coolness to the touch disturbing when contrasted to her appearance.

The next day a tailor was hanging pin-striped cloth on me in my new office. I fingered my sleeve. "All that's left is church." I mused.

I kept my place in Cambridge and the Foundation sent someone over to take care of Bunny while I stayed on in New Haven for a while. Katie and Amy basically took charge of my life. Next thing I knew I had a short haircut, a neatly trimmed moustache and a closet full of tasteful suits. Katie was preparing an IPO

and my job was to publicize the venture with Amy at my side. As far as the world was concerned, she was my robot assistant and it was only noticeable that she was artificial on close examination. I was going to get to introduce her to the world on the *This Morning* show with Lauren Vrabec.

Amy and I were sent to get makeup in two separate rooms. I told them she didn't need any. I didn't know what the make-up girl would think of Amy. Probably that she had had a lot of cosmetic surgery, but I couldn't let her put anything on her skin because we were going to demo the color changes. She just sat and chatted with me while they took the shine off of my nose and scalp.

A production assistant made sure I had coffee and pointed out the snack table. Then Lauren stuck her face in with a big smile. God she was hot! "Welcome, Mister Zimmer! This should be such an interesting segment!"

She took my hand in hers and looked straight into my eyes, but I sensed that she had no idea who I was.

"You don't remember me, do you Lauren."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm Jake Zimmer."

"Of course, but we have met before?" I have to admit that my feelings were a bit hurt.

"The rats at Crandall Labs? The bujus that invaded Cambridge?"

Her eyes just dilated ever so slightly. She was all pro. She released my hand and the smile only looked the tiniest bit forced now. "Of *course* I remember you! Your circumstances certainly have changed, haven't they?" Translation: *"You don't look as much like a low-life as you used to"*.

"Things have been happening in my life, that's for sure." I gestured toward Amy. "This is my assistant, Miss Amy Camus."

Lauren looked hard at Amy without extending her hand. One woman rapidly assessing the qualities of another. "You are very beautiful." She finally said after a few seconds of silence. It sounded more like an accusation than praise.

"Amy designed her own appearance." I said.

"If only all of us could." said Lauren while she continued to stare at Amy. She finally tore her eyes away and said, "Well…I'm looking forward to your segment!" and hurried off. That bitch. I still wanted her so bad it hurt.

Our segment came up at nine and had been teased throughout the program with film clips of Amy without her skin. Lauren introduced us as "Jacob Zimmer, CEO of the newly formed Prototech Corporation and Amy Camus."

Lauren was upbeat speaking quickly and clearly. "Mister Zimmer has created what some people are calling the 'ultimate product', true humanoid robots! Tell me Mister Zimmer, for what purpose have you made these unique creations?"

“First of all, Lauren, please call me Jake.” I took a breath. “Our robots can do everything a person can do, tirelessly, efficiently and with directly programmable training. They can operate in situations where a human would be at unacceptable risk. Also they can act as tour guides with encyclopedic knowledge, in administrative positions that require dealing with the public and processing large amounts of information, diplomatic aids or even baby-sitters!”

Lauren looked over at Amy. “Now I would like to introduce your companion, Miss Amy Camus. My understanding is that she is your administrative assistant, is that correct?”

“That she is, Lauren, and they don’t come any better.”

“And also that she is a machine.”

“Also correct.”

“Amy, can you tell us about yourself?”

The camera got close on Amy. I doubt that her artificiality was immediately apparent on TV. “Certainly. As you said, my name is Amy Camus. I am almost two weeks old although I have a lifetime’s worth of data and memories. I have the contents of several libraries stored within me and can access more information as needed. I speak and translate twenty languages and more can be programmed in if required.” As she spoke she started to slowly change her skin color toward a darker shade. “To some degree I can alter my appearance as required by the customer to blend in and not be conspicuous.” Her color snapped back to her norm.

Lauren hadn’t expected that and just said “Wow!” Almost instantly she was back on track. “As I’m sure everyone has noticed, you are quite attractive.”

“Thank you, Lauren.” Amy blushed ever so slightly, on purpose, no doubt. “I designed my own face. It is a composite of several women plus a few ideas of my own. Although I’m artificial, I was given the personality of a woman and as a woman, I’m sure you must understand. If you had the chance to design your own body, would you build in flaws?”

Lauren laughed a little nervously. “No, I suppose I wouldn’t. Lord knows I work hard enough to conceal the ones I have.”

“Exactly.”

Briefly, Lauren flashed a *just what the hell is that supposed to mean?* look. “But Amy, do you worry that some people might be put off by how human you look? I’m sitting right next to you and I can barely tell.”

I jumped in. “Amy is sort of a concept model in which we incorporated all of the most human qualities we could simulate. She is quite expensive. The average space probe costs less than her. Production models will mostly look a good deal less real. We don’t even have to make them perfectly human shaped. The advantage of being our size and shape is that they can use our tools and work spaces and won’t alarm people. We carefully avoided putting any little access doors in her body or

flashing lights on her. You can't open up her head like Commander Data on Star Trek. If something goes wrong, smoke won't come out of her ears. The idea was to make her seem as normal and everyday as possible."

"So just how human is she? Does she have real independent thought?"

This is where I had to lie. "I know that she reacts so much like a person that you will be tempted to think she is one, but she is only a mechanism. There are no philosophical quandaries here. She behaves as she is programmed to and if we wish her to behave otherwise, she can be reprogrammed."

"Amy," asked Lauren, "do you have feelings?"

"I have emotional reactions built into my personality, but I can turn them off if I am ordered to."

"Do you have a sense of touch?"

"Oh yes! My skin is the result of a breakthrough technology. I'm almost as sensitive as you."

"You feel pain? Pleasure?"

"I definitely sense when I am damaged or in danger of being damaged. My skin is more difficult to repair than yours. Many sensations are pleasurable to me."

"Do you have…erotic sensation?"

I jumped in again. "Again, as proof of concept, we attempted to make Amy as much like a real human as possible."

Lauren gave me a sidelong glance. "Really?" And then to Amy, "Can you have sexual relations?"

"Yes."

"Jake, are you planning on marketing a, how do I put this…'personal companion' robot?"

What a bitch. "We do not currently have specific plans to that effect. At the price they would have to be, it would be hard to make them competitive with, um, 'independent contractors'."

"Are you trying to be funny, Mister Zimmer? Are you planning on marketing a robot prostitute or not?" Wow. This got ugly a little faster than I expected. Why was she doing this to me? We were promised this would be kept light.

"Without going into specifics unsuited to daytime television, I would have to say that we have the ability to design and manufacture such a thing. *If* such a device were made, it wouldn't be a 'prostitute'; it would be a 'marital aid.'"

Lauren gave a short laugh. "So such a device would indeed be possible? It's hard for me to imagine how someone like *her* would be of *aid* to any marriage."

I finally got her to move on by having Amy translate something into Chinese before we went to break.

As we walked off I turned and asked Lauren, "What the hell was *that* about?"

"Some of us think you might be pimping a mechanical whore."

“I don’t think I’d want to risk pissing off your union!” I growled and then hustled Amy out of the building. Even after that, I *still* wanted her. I remembered that I had read a tabloid story that she had just broken up with Danny “Squeeze” Cuthbert, the Mets second bagger over a report that he had been seen with prostitutes. Well, it wasn’t just a report. There were photos. Very *dirty* photos. Maybe that was where the hostility came from. Not very professional, if true. I have to say that I found Lauren even *more* attractive when she was being a total bitch. Something is definitely wrong with me.

“Oh well,” I thought, “there will be other appearances.” I look back on that with wonder at my foolish optimism. The other appearances were not any better because one media event feeds on another. Through the receipt of a great deal of inquiries, we learned that there would indeed be a substantial market for robot sex machines of both sexes and from other communications we also learned that we would be crucified in the news media if we were to manufacture them. Amy was very adept in business and the technologies she developed did make us money and lots of it, but the robots mostly didn’t look exactly like human beings.

Helper Elf hit the market a few months later. A three quarter sized light green skinned sexless humanoid that ate standard pet foods or even organic garbage, it was a boon to frazzled housewives, the handicapped and the elderly. They did shopping, played games, did housework, answered phones and just about anything else the user asked. They were all leased by the corporation on one year agreements. The units were expensive, but not as expensive as Amy by a long shot. Even so, we put it in our contracts that failure to protect the units from major harm could make the user liable for the entire cost of the unit which was in excess of one hundred thousand dollars on the earlier models. The leaser was also responsible for insuring the units. Strangely, that did not deter some people from killing them just for fun once in a while. All of the units were equipped with GPS so we could locate them at all times.

Leasing was mostly for controlling the technology and keeping people from buying a unit to dissect and reverse engineer it, but we knew we wouldn’t be able to do that forever. Hopefully long enough to establish our brand and stay the market leader for a long, long time. New times were upon all of us.

III

Chapter six
City of Danger

The Range Buddies have not been directly covered by the cave in, merely sealed into one corridor. There are several rooms leading off of the corridor in which they are trapped and they start searching rooms to see if they can find anything to free themselves.

In one room, they find an inactive robot with huge claws. On its chest is a large knob with a pointer that points to various commands such as "walk", "fight", "hold", "dig", "defend" and "destroy." Hoping that he is not making a mistake, Curley turns the knob to "walk" and the robot comes to life and starts walking toward them. The frightened buddies back out of the room ahead of it and it follows at a steady pace until they are backed up against the pile of rubble from the fallen roof. They are all petrified until Texas Bill's face lights up and he smiles and snaps his fingers. He reaches out and turns the knob to "dig." Instantly the robot starts digging through the pile of rubble.

While the robot digs, Johnny sets off to explore other rooms in hopes of finding something useful. While looking another way a hairy arm grabs him and pulls him through a door. It is his friend Poggo the gorilla and Chima the jungle girl is with him. Chima tells Johnny about the phone call she overheard. Johnny is amazed to hear that Dugan and Mighty Matomba are one in the same and that he is in cahoots with the corrupt police force of the secret city. Chima tells him of Pandar and how he is unaware of Gondar's duplicity. She is certain that if they can reach Pandar, he will help them.

Johnny is about to ask Chima how to get out of the city when he hears the
other shout that the robot has successfully burrowed through the debris. When he turns around to tell Chima to follow him, both she and the gorilla are nowhere to be seen. Johnny rushes out and is about to tell the others that Dugan and Matomba are one in the same, but before he can, a cohort of the city guard come marching toward them. They are taken prisoner and confined in separate cells.

Curley hurls himself uselessly at his door as the guards walk away laughing. Texas Bill similarly searches for a crack in the doorframe or a window. All the cells do have a tiny barred window that look out on an open court. Johnny is despondent wondering how he has fallen from one mess directly into another. Before he can think about it too much he hears a strange sound, like an immense screw turning. The walls are slowly closing in shrinking the size of the tiny room every second. Curley and Texas Bill are in a similar fix with no possibility of escape. Their destiny appears to be that of being squashed into paste.

Amy pondered the paper for a few seconds. “It’s just a synopsis, right?”

“Yes.” I said.

“And there is no actual filmed serial that it describes?”

“No, there isn’t.”

“And you have no intention of making one?”

“Of course not.”

Again, she pondered. I think this was mostly for show. She wrinkled her brow appearing to be engaged in deep thought. She could process information very quickly and required no pauses in her speech to organize her thoughts, but she had discovered that too quick a response made her seem less human. She paced back and forth through a pool of afternoon sunshine that fell on the tan carpet in my office. “Then it’s stupid.” She finally said.

“Stupid? *Stupid* isn’t a review! Besides, it isn’t *stupid*, it’s *high concept*!”

“Call it what you want, but I wouldn’t put it in a magazine you want to be thought of as respectable.”

“But the whole reason I started the magazine was so I could publish what I want!”

“Jake, trust me. Aren’t I your best friend? You shouldn’t be your own editor. You ought to do as I recommended and hire an editor and give him the power to reject your work if he sees fit.”

“Shit! What’s the point of having my own magazine if I can be rejected by it? Besides, you recommended that asswipe Dave Beiderman!”

“Because he’s good and you owe him for helping you out early on. Believe it or not, he’s a huge fan of your work.”

“Beiderman is a fan? You’re not as smart as you think, Dollface.” I called her “Dollface” sometimes because when she had her prototype skin she sometimes looked like a doll. Her current skin was much more refined. It was very difficult to tell her from a human without close examination. The new skin even gave her a surface temperature comparable to normal humans. It also somehow gave her the *smell* of a human woman which was, frankly, distracting.

She threw up her hands. “Do what you want, but an editor will keep you from looking like a fool. The readers will just say you are a guy with too much money who gets his work in print because he owns the magazine. And please don’t call me *dollface*. It’s patronizing.”

I know we sound like a married couple, but she is *not* my girlfriend. All of the tabloid media think she is my sex toy because we are seen together all the time. As far as the public are concerned, she is my executive assistant, but the fact is that *she* really runs Prototech and I am a front so the world doesn’t know that the corporation is run by a robot. “Oh, come on! ‘dollface’ means a pretty girl!”

“Really,” she said in a withering tone, “even with all the tabloids calling me a ‘sex doll’?”

“You designed your own body. Why did you make yourself so hot?”

“And I suppose you would have made yourself an ogre if the shoe had been on the other foot.” The thing about Amy was that she was not like the Helper-elves ™ or the Frenchmaids™ or the Katz™ and the Dawgs™ that Prototech made. She was alive with independent consciousness and, bless her, she was a *woman* and all that implies. She had the personality of a super being from the future who had the mental capacity to design amazingly realistic androids and yet somehow found a way to reject logic when it suited her. The aggravating thing is that I was certain that she didn’t really think that way, but acted that way to enhance her appearance of being a human by catering to male expectations of how a woman behaves. It created a rhetorical advantage for her that men are programmed to expect and, to some degree, respect.

“If the shoe is ever on the other foot, I’ll let you know. You supposedly have an encyclopedic understanding of our culture and yet you didn’t know how big a can of worms you opened up? If there is the *slightest* implication that people could

have sex slaves, automated or not, the whole social structure gets shaky. You really should have made yourself look more like a robot."

"Why wouldn't you make love with Klutig Alshoin?" Whoah! That came out of the clear blue. Klutig, in the strictest sense, was not a human being and for some reason, I had been constantly aware of that fact. It wasn't just that I didn't find her attractive, although she was rather bizarre looking in many ways. Her odd appearance didn't stop what seems like just about every one else I knew from sleeping with her.

"I thought we were talking about hiring an editor for the magazine?"

"So, you'll hire Dave Beiderman then?"

"All right, all right! I'll hire Dave." Man, she was good. She smiled coyly and approached me finally snuggling up against me and looking up into my eyes.

"Why won't you make love to *me*?" This was my least favorite question from her and really difficult to answer while her breasts were pressing against me and a hard-on she could easily detect was swelling in my pants. We had had versions of the conversation before that always end with me dodging the question in various ways. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, but they were the same reason as those I had about Klutig. She was not a human being. The difference is that Klutig was never overtly sexual with me. She had behaviors that must have led many people to come on to her, such as a casual attitude about sexual discussion and nudity. Amy was both much more normal looking and much more aggressive. I don't know if she actually wanted me or just wanted me to want her. For whatever reasons, she would engage in behaviors toward me that could only be described as sluttish. She ordered lingerie that would make Russ Meyer blush and insist on modeling it for me. She posed for a portfolio of photos to promote the company and had a private nude set made that she gave me as a gift. When I appeared to be under stress, she would suggest helping me relax in ways that would be anything but relaxing and having to extend a polite refusal actually would make me *more* tense.

"Why do you keep doing this? Is it just that you want to test your sexual response systems?"

"I've *done* that!"

"What? With who?"

"Do I ask *you* who you sleep with?"

"You're full of it. You're with me most of the time. You're just the world's sluttiest virgin."

She stroked me through the front of my pants while she wiggled against me. "You could change that." She said in a low, breathy voice. "Why did you have them make my skin warm, make me even more human? Why would you want that if you didn't want *me*?"

I disengaged from her and said, “I’d better call Dave.” That was too pointed a question and I didn’t have a good answer for it. I didn’t have *any* answer for it and coming up with one would require something unthinkable like examining my feelings.

She could see that I was annoyed. “Hey, I was only playing around.” I’m sure that it was the truth. I don’t know if she even got “horny” like a human being, but she really got what appeared to be enjoyment out of working her sexuality. She liked pushing the envelope with her clothing when we went out to dinner, enjoyed just taking that extra step closer to men when she was talking to them, showing a lot of leg and a lot of cleavage. I know plenty of guys had made arch inquires of her even though it was all over the press that she was with me. Complicating things further was the fact that I had not had time for a normal social life since I had joined Prototech. I *am* a human being and I *was* horny.

“Uh-huh. We’ll talk about it later. Right now, I’m going to call Dave.”

There actually was a version of the Amy model going into production although purposely made to look at least a little less human and have a whole lot less autonomy *and* anatomy. The initial idea is that they will be tirelessly patient customer service representatives, tour guides, information specialists, helpers for the handicapped and elderly and numerous other applications. As well as humans, they will look like cartoon characters, historical figures, anthropomorphic animals or corporate mascots or even science fiction robots. *None* of them will have sex organs or a libido. I made it known that I want one that looks exactly like 1-A from the *Magnus, Robot Fighter* comics but Amy looked hurt when I talked about it so I dropped the idea.

Dave took the job and seemed to be unsurprised that I offered it to him. I suspect that Amy had done some pre-arranging behind my back. That was no great revelation, just one of the many things that reminded me that it was actually she who was in charge in spite of my fancy title. I was really *her* assistant, but even so, I didn’t do all that much assisting. My days were largely spent writing until I was called upon to perform some public relations task or another. I was a spokesmodel, designed to behave like an executive when needed. Fuck, it was anybody’s guess who was really the robot here. In spite of the fact that my life had been far from planned out, I was pretty sure that this was not the life I had planned.

Working with Beiderman wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. Protech was the magazine’s biggest advertiser and they obviously weren’t going anywhere. Not worrying about that made him much more easy-going. He completely rejected the remainder of the serial synopsis which had started to run in *Big Idea*. He recommended that it should be incorporated into a novel or a series of stories. His idea was that I should slow down and cultivate my own voice, stop being so dependent on parodies and pastiches of pulps and comic books. He pointed out that

I had a bunch of decent unpublished stories and he would run one in each issue while I worked on something new and coherent. Why was it that everyone around me seemed to be smarter than me lately?

He was given the first of the Amy knock-offs as his secretary. She didn't look a lot like Amy. She was taller and blonde. She was called Jen. Compared with Amy, she looked far less human, more cartoonish. Her head was somewhat larger in proportion to her body than a human and she was very wasp-wasted, like a Barbie doll. She looked just human enough to be relatable and just inhuman enough not to give you the creeps. She was unfailingly polite, tireless and made no pretense of humanity, never pretending to think before she gave an answer. She didn't leave the office at night, but merely went into dormant mode at her desk although she was ready to function at any hour. Her computer didn't have a keyboard or a monitor, she interacted with it and the whole network wirelessly. I struck me that she was the realization of what Katie Babcock had been trying to be when she worked for Klutig at Dynomex. There was no head set and no constant chatter, just assured efficiency and knowledge of everything that was going on around her. I had seen her being put together. Her skin was just smooth plastic. She had no nipples or genitals or even toes. It was good just to know that. The fact that Dave got used to her almost immediately was testament to the fact that we had a winning product on our hands.

With Dave on board, I started to feel a whole lot more relaxed and like I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. As usual, Amy had been right. I just wondered how come *I* was never the one who was right anymore.

IV

Untitled Science Fiction Novel Project

Chapter Two

The unusually fertile star system was named Orient in the spirit of the romantic era in which it was discovered. The first human colonies were in the belt of asteroids known as "The Indies" which were found to be extraordinarily rich in heavy metals. To the surprise and delight of the of the first survey teams the system contained four planets Levant, Cathay, Cipango and Siam, which were perfectly suited to human life. These included both the

smallest (Siam)and the largest (Levant) naturally Earth-like worlds ever found. All had a wide variety of plant and animal life, but none showed any sign of civilization either past or present. As well there were four great gas giants Tartary, Tuva, Altay and Manchu.

The center of life in the Orient system was the planet Cipango, which was very nearly the same size and climate as Earth although it had fewer and smaller land masses. The total land area of the world was about equal to that of Europe, Asia and Africa combined broken into four widely separated continents and a multitude of islands. One of these continents occupied the north polar region and was uninhabited.

The people seen on Cipango were among the most diversified in physical characteristics and subculture in the human worlds.

Although the planet had a single Governor responsible to the constitution of the Protectorate and its laws, the planet was divided into a multitude of "countries" which were home to many distinct cultures, languages and modes of living. While all of these people were (more or less) loyal citizens of the Protectorate, they were more likely to think of themselves as possessing the nationality of their particular countries. This colonial world saw itself as being free of the social baggage of Earth and upon its discovery and opening for colonization, became a magnet for those who wished to be free of even the relatively easy and inclusive social system of the first Protectorate. Centuries later, it now sheltered one of the older and more complex cultures of the second, now interplanetary, Protectorate.

At Sandino which was the great metropolis of this world, could be found people of all types. Tall and short, ranging through a rainbow of skin colors, some patently artificial, and covering a dizzying variety of fashion choices. Here was seen the conservative side by side with the flamboyant, those in full burqa in the same streets with the dedicated nudists.

Architecture in the city reflected the general philosophy of its people. All the vendors and markets pulled back the entire front of their buildings when open so that people might wander from the street as if the store was a part of it. Many vendors even carried their wares out upon the broad walks beneath a plethora of brightly colored awnings. Cafes, taverns and restaurants all offered seating along the walks where one might enjoy a break while observing the passing river of humanity.

The bronze skinned lady sat in a sunny sidewalk cafe savoring a cup of coffee. It was on this world that she had her few contacts with humanity. She was slowly getting used to being among people. Now taking a little time to enjoy some of her purely human feelings. The tastes of food and drink, drawing lungs full of air, wind in her hair, these were all rare sensations for one who had chosen to live in the spaces between the stars. She had also taken a somewhat wry pleasure in the glances of various men who were clearly attracted by her unclad beauty. Her physical perfection was remarkable enough to set her far apart from the masses who wandered the streets, but her remoteness, her seeming lack of spiritual presence would put others off to some extent. The men would look twice only to be turned away by the almost complete disinterest in her eyes. A man's ego must suffer when given the same look as one might give a bug.

Although she had trained herself to relate to others, it was a discipline rather than an instinct. She would only speak when spoken to and would tend to move among people as if they were not there. Getting her attention could at times be difficult as it now was for a waiter.

"Senta Stratton?" he asked tentatively. He repeated himself twice before she looked up at him. "Senta Stratton, there has been a reply to your message from Luna."

Yes.....she remembered now. She was hardly ever called by name and sometimes she forgot she had one. The waiter pointed to the device on the table in front of her, the Vademecum, the single personal accessory of the average citizen of the Protectorate.

"I will have it relayed" said the waiter.

The lady took another sip of coffee as she touched the surface of the device and said one word.

"Messages?"

The semi transparent head and shoulders of a young woman appeared over the device and spoke to her.

"Aunt Lorraine, what an unexpected pleasure to hear from you. I will go to Bettina to tell the Patriarch that you are coming.

"As Family head, I found some of your message disturbing. It will raise concerns that there are disputes among the Masters, although I'm sure you will be able to shed some light on this issue.

"Please come to Bettina. You should be able to sight the beacon from SanChristobal. We will all look forward to you arrival."

The lady spoke to the Vademecum.

"Arrange to have my accounts at Tenochtitlan opened" She was going to need resources if she was to go about in human society.

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A tiny world, barely bigger than an asteroid, orbited alone about a small red star near the galactic core. Its population was small in numbers but powerful in influence. This was the nameless home of the Masters. These people were the remnant of a once numerous race who had traveled the universe widely. They had spanned the galaxy at the time the Earth was just congealing from cosmic dust and were at that time the owners of a great trading and exploring empire. On countless worlds, including the infant Earth, they sowed the seeds of life. The details of their history are too great for easy encapsulation, suffice it to say that theirs is a long rich heritage which wove itself through each era of the galaxy's development. Around the time that the great dinosaurs walked the Earth, their society met with unprecedented disaster. A force was released, in what had been considered at the time a minor internal conflict, which wiped out all life in the ten central solar systems of their empire. The civilization fell into ruins on a thousand different worlds, none ever again

reaching the greatness of what had gone before. In many cases the descendents of the sentient inhabitants returned to the wilds as mere animals.

A small group of individuals who gained control of some key technologies established themselves on this tiny world and swore to restore order to the universe. They, with neither false modesty nor exaggeration, referred to themselves as the Masters. They created a great plan and set a system of policies that they set out to enforce among the emerging new races of the galaxy. They invested representatives of these races with a conduit to their energy source that could allow a single being to direct the power of an entire sun if he were to call upon it. These persons were the police force of the Masters and were known wherever they went as "Lightmen".

Now a new crisis loomed and the masters were at the same time consumed with dread at the possible consequences and relishing the challenge it presented.

The individuals among the race of the Masters were all old beyond the understanding of humans. Many among them were alive during the heyday of their former greatness. Some few of that number could remember their race first striving toward galactic prominence, their lifetimes measured in billions of years. They were unimpressive looking creatures for all that, a segmented cylindrical body with four multi-purpose limbs and a complex sensory array at one end. Their distant ancestor was something perhaps like an annelid worm but evolution and their own manipulation has removed them far from that heritage.

In conference with one another they had identified what tools, both mechanical and personified as beings, were required for them to rise to the challenge of the new crisis. The time had arrived in their response to include the latest in this tool kit to be brought into play.

The individual among the Masters who was responsible for the timing of events in their program spoke aloud very rarely but the memory of this particular tool prompted the being to vocalize the name. In that part of the Master's reach this was the most unique individual.

"John Stratton". The Master spoke the name a few times in a sing-song fashion as it tapped at a few control devices.....setting the next phase in motion.

Dave took off his reading glasses and looked up. “It still reads as awfully retro, but on the whole it’s a big improvement. I think you’re on a good track.”

I nodded. “So we can serialize it then?”

“I want to see at least two more chapters before we commit to it and you still need a title.”

“Yeah, that sounds fair enough.”

“And you don’t need to write in that goober font you’re using. There is no way I’m going to print it in that.”

Beiderman was an expert at finding little ways to piss me off. I left his office and returned to my own to find Katie Babcock waiting for me. When the Camus

Foundation transitioned into the Protech Corporation, I replaced her as CEO even though I was just a figurehead. Katie did *real* work as VP in charge of product development. With her were two six-foot-four Beefcakes with hand trucks loaded with stuff, *my* stuff from my apartment in Cambridge. “Amy wanted me to let you know she needs you to move to New Haven on a permanent basis. You will have a luxury apartment right on the corporation grounds.”

The Beefcakes looked at me with amiable and somewhat stupid grins. “Yo!” said one.

“Hey bro!” said the other. Beefcakes were the biggest, strongest model we made. They were for heavy lifting, transport, warehouse work, etc. Some single women kept them for reaching high shelves, moving furniture and opening jars. They were designed to be as non-threatening as possible because of their size so they were made movie-star handsome and with permanent friendly smiles as their default expression.

“Move!? I have a life in Cambridge! Friends!”

“Not really according to Amy. All you do is writing or do research for writing and you positively *avoid* your friends. They’re lucky if they see you once in six months! Your ‘life’, such as it is, mostly takes place on the internet. We have the internet in New Haven too. The elves will unload the truck and set up the apartment. It will be ready for you by five.”

“Look, that…*machine* can’t just take over my life. She can’t just make me do what she wants.”

“Amy isn’t a toaster, she isn’t even a computer. She’s a person, a person who has made both of us very wealthy! Don’t you like having the fifty year old scotch, the super computer, that ridiculous comic book collection, playing racquet-ball with Steve Jobs?”

“I *hate* that game! He’s a decade older than me and still wins every time.” I took a deep breath. “Yeah, there are benefits, I understand that. You don’t get it. You’re just a kid. Having a crazy life is natural for someone your age, but as I get older, my life get crazier and crazier just when it’s supposed to be getting more settled and comfortable. I want to *write* about hot female robots, not be a slave to one! Where in the hell is she anyway?”

“She’s over at your apartment making sure the Beefcakes don’t break anything.”

I sighed. “And where might that be?”

“Building Nine.”

I have to admit that the place was fabulous. Utterly deluxe. Wood paneling, tasteful art (no doubt original), nice carpeting, nice view of West Rock through big windows, the works. There were ten rooms including a library, an office and a gourmet kitchen! I had a funny feeling that I was never going to be allowed to

cook for myself in it. There was a Helper Elf, a Frenchmaid and a secretary that seemed to be a clone of Beiderman's.

Amy was giving the Beefcake movers directions about where to put shelves, furniture and a perfectly enormous bed. "Hey!" I said. "What's with the bed? I sleep on a futon on the floor."

Amy turned around with a dazzling smile. "There you are! Don't be ridiculous, you're not a barbarian, you're not a college kid and you're not Japanese. You need a bed."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, Mom!"

"Look, you just have to accept that you are going to be living a different life now."

"The fuck I do. Take the bed out and yourself with it. I'll see you at the office." She looked shocked and hurt, but turned silently and left. I turned to the secretary. "What's your name?"

"Becky, Mister Zimmer."

"Becky, please order me a king size futon with all of the appropriate bedding and have it here by this afternoon. Have those big goons get that bed out of here."

"Aw, dude!" said one of the Beefcakes.

"Shut up." I snapped.

"Yes, Mister Zimmer." Said Becky.

"You can call me Jake when we are in the apartment and there are no guests." I waved my hand at the surroundings. "See to it that this is all straightened out."

"Yes, Jake."

"When you're done, come report to me at my office, you'll be working there."

I left the apartment and returned to my office. Within ten minutes Amy came in without knocking. "How could you treat me like that?" She asked.

"How could *I* treat *you* like that? You're the one who treated my life like it was yours to do with as you pleased. I'll take the job, but I don't think it's necessary for me to be around you all of the time. You need me for public relations? Have no fear, I'll do it and I'll take the paycheck, but you don't need my hour to hour assistance. Now please get out of my office, I'm trying to write."

"Jake, I'm sorry if I somehow offended your manhood…"

"No need to be sorry. Just be somewhere else." She did a good job of looking like she was going to cry, but she turned and got out just as Becky was coming in. She stopped and looked at her for only a split second.

When I went home that evening, Bunny had been moved in. He was teaching the Bobo, Helper Elf and Babbette, the Frenchmaid to do the Hokey-Pokey.

Over the next couple of months I learned the ropes. I appeared at press conferences, speaking engagements and boardroom meetings with Amy by my side and reading from notes prepared by her. I even went to dinner with her publicly at

least twice a week, but the rest of the time I was aggressively off the clock. My conversation with her was friendly but impersonal.

My real socializing was with Jerry and Katie who had gotten pretty domestic. They still had their own places, but Katie was over at Jerry's almost every night. One evening while Jerry was spinning some newly acquired wax, Katie said, "You know Jake, Amy misses you."

"What are you talking about? I see her every day."

"She misses you being her friend."

"Bullshit. She misses me being her pet."

Jerry said, "No man, seriously. She's really sorry that she pissed you off."

"Did she put you up to this?"

"No!" Protested Katie. "Maybe a little bit. She loves you Jake."

"Don't be fooled. Even though she contains the um…*engram* of a living being, she is not actually a living being. She is a program that Klutig left behind. She simulates all of these emotions because it makes it easier for us to do what she needs us to. Well, she doesn't have to do it for me, the money is enough."

As it happens, Amy appeared at my apartment about a week after that. It was around nine PM. I was at my computer in the library when Babbette, the Frenchmaid interrupted me. "Monsieur Zeemair, you have zee visituer, Mademoiselle Camus."

"Jesus Christ, Babbette! *Must* you speak in that Pepe LePew accent?"

"It ees standaird wiz zees modél, I am sorree."

"Nevermind, I'll be right out. Offer her a drink." I had no idea what she could want, but she was still the boss.

I found her seated on the couch in the living room. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a tank-top with flat sandals. Her hair was in a pony-tail. A pretty casual look for her. "Hello Amy, what's up?"

"I just have something to show you! You're going to love it!" She seemed energetic and excited. She picked up a box that was sitting beside her and handed it to me.

I had exactly no expectations and therefore couldn't help but be surprised when I opened it. I was a little more than surprised and yelped and dropped the box as I jumped back. It was a large gray rat. "Shit! What the hell, Amy!"

The rat didn't run away. It just sat on the floor looking at me, then it reared up on its hind legs and I saw that it had a tiny sword on a belt around its belly. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck. "That's not funny." I said weakly.

"It's a new product. *SmartRat*! Teams of them can be used for home defense." She had a slightly *off* look in her eyes.

“It’s a robot? Oh, Amy! This is a very, very bad idea! People hate rats. *I* hate rats. I hate them a lot!”

“Don’t you recognize him? I think he’s cute!”

“Yes, I recognize him and no, he’s not cute. Can you get him out of my apartment please?”

“He has lots of friends too.” About twenty more of the sword-wearing rodent-bots emerged from under the couch. Amy *definitely* had a crazy look in her eye.

“Holy shit!” I freaked. I bolted. I was out of the apartment and into the parking lot in less than ten seconds. Something strange was going on in the meticulously maintained shrubbery around the building. I thought I saw familiar and unwelcome tiny black eyes watching from the shadows. I pulled out my cell to call Jerry and warn him that Amy had flipped when it was suddenly wrenched out of my hand from behind.

I turned around and what I saw was terrifying and somehow not unexpected given the circumstances. A buju, full sized and healthy. I had almost forgotten that they weren’t all little like Bunny. I wasn’t thinking real clearly, at least not clearly enough to immediately realize it was a robot so I tried the one thing that had worked in the past. “Bujuthahapibuni!” I shouted at it.

The buju-bot said “Shaddup!” and smacked me across the face with one of its bracts.

I didn’t go down, but I definitely saw stars. “Ow! What the fuck?” I turned and ran unsteadily for Jerry’s place before more of them showed up. The buju-bot didn’t follow, thank God. I had to warn Jerry and Katie and call the cops.

They were only two buildings away and I was buzzing their intercom within thirty seconds. “’Allo?” inquired a pseudo-gallically accented female voice. It was Antoinette, their Frenchmaid.

“Antoinette, it’s Jake, let me in!”

“Oui, Monsieur Zeemair.” The door buzzed.

I was in the apartment a second later. Jerry was looking at me expectantly. “Bujus! Rats!” I exclaimed.

“What? What the hell are you talking about?”

I was out of breath and must have looked crazy. “Rats!”

Jerry gazed at me with wary sympathy. “Jake,” he asked gently, “these rats, are they *up to something*?”

“I’m not crazy, dammit, but Amy is! Her brain is short circuited or something! She had them make robot rats with swords and robot bujus! One of them stole my phone and hit me!”

He still looked skeptical, but I had said crazy stuff before that had turned out to be true. *Lots* of crazy stuff. “So, what do you want to do?”

Katie came into the room looking quizzical. “What’s going on?”

“A; call the cops and, b; get the hell out of here.” I said in answer to Jerry’s question.

“Amy is acting strange.” Said Jerry in answer to Katie’s.

I grabbed the phone to dial 911. There was no dial tone. “Well”, I said, “this is something of a cliché.”

“What?” said Jerry and Katie in chorus.

“Line’s dead. Gimme your cell.” I was about to punch the numbers on Katie’s phone when I noticed there were no bars. “I think we got problems.”

“Maybe we ought to just go.” said Jerry. For the first time he sounded actually worried.

I handed Katie back her phone and we headed for the door only to find Norbert, the Helper Elf and Antoinette blocking our way. “Madame and Messieurs you must not leave le maison.” Said Antoinette.

“Says who?” Said Jerry indignantly.

“Sez me!” said Norbert pointing a thumb at his chest.

“This is ridiculous.” I said.

I grabbed an umbrella from the stand by the door and drove it through Norbert’s midsection with all my strength. Something inside him shorted and he collapsed Jerry smashed Antoinette’s head with a paperweight and she stumbled away from the door with one of her eyes popped out. “Merde!” she crackled. Production models aren’t all that durable.

We split post haste. “You guys have a car?” I asked.

“I always use the company car service.”

“Yeah, me too. No phone to call for one. I guess we’re hoofing it.”

When we got out to the lot, we saw Amy calmly walking toward us followed by a swarm of rat-bots and a half dozen buju-bots. “Gadzooks!” exclaimed Jerry, “I should know by now that the crazier something you say sounds the more likely it is to be true!”

“We should get to the security office.” Said Katie. That was in the basement of the main building. It was a good thought. We could find a walky-talky there and maybe get the police. I remember thinking how super nice it would be if just once I could stop some insane situation *before* it got completely out of hand. I felt that chance slipping through my fingers yet again.

I looked over my shoulder as I started trotting toward the main building. Amy had not picked up her deliberate pace, but she waived the rat-bots and buju-bots ahead. The buju-bots moved differently from real bujus. They probably had an internal skeleton unlike their prototype, but they weren’t as fast and agile as real bujus. It was easy to stay ahead of them.

We got to the front door and Katie tried her card key, but it wouldn’t work. She threw it away in disgust and grabbed a rock from the shrubbery border. It was big

enough to throw her off balance. I grabbed it from her and heaved it against the plate glass door. The first time it scratched up the glass, but the door held. The second time it shattered with a satisfying splintery crash and we carefully went through. Some instinct told me we should take the stairs rather than the elevator. It was dawning on me that Amy had control of anything that was run through the computer network.

We headed for the stairs. We rounded the corner and saw a Beefcake standing in front of the door to the stairwell. He flashed us a perfect smile and held up a hand. “Hey. Wassup? I’m Mike. Sorry, but I can’t let you pass.” He looked just like the lumberjack from that paper towel commercial and sounded a lot like Patrick Warburton.

This guy we wouldn’t be able to bring down as easily as the maid and the elf. Beefcakes were built tough. Jerry and I looked at one another. “What now?” he whispered. Katie smiled up at both of us and winked. She walked over to the Beefcake and said something very quietly.

“Wassat miss? You’re gonna have t’speak up.”

She repeated herself even more quietly. The Beefcake bent way over to attempt to listen. Suddenly he went stiff and keeled over hitting the floor with a solid THUD! “I said ‘don’t fuck with me!’” she shouted at the inert robot.

She turned toward us with a big goofy grin holding up some sort of device. “What is that?” I asked “A taser?”

“More like a mini cattle prod. It’s handy when you’re little and don’t want to be raped or robbed. I think it’s tougher on one of these guys than an actual human. He’s going to need some parts before he gets up again.” I *never* underestimate Katie Babcock! She is more resourceful than any ten boy scouts put together.

We ran down the stairs to the garage level. The security office was right there at the bottom and locked. “Shouldn’t someone be here twenty-four, seven?” I asked.

Katie sighed. “Usually. I had to fire Myles for drinking on the shift so we don’t have coverage all night this week. Ray comes in for overnight at eleven.”

“Shit!” I tried my card key which, of course didn’t work. “Double shit!” I slammed it with my shoulder which didn’t work as well as it seems to in the movies. It took Jerry and I working together a couple of tries before the door gave and we both were hurting for the effort.

I had been vaguely hoping we would find guns, not that I had ever fired one. None were anyplace obvious. There were a couple of radios sitting in a charger. I grabbed one an pressed the button on the side. Nothing. I moved the little cursor through the little channel indicator. Just white noise. “Oh, this sucks!”

There was a locker in the corner, but it looked tough enough that I couldn’t force it open without destroying the contents. One thing that was working was the security camera system. On two big flat screen monitors it displayed the view from

fifty cameras of the parking lots and all of the corridors in the office. Any one of them could be selected and be made to fill the screen. In one of the views we could see Amy and the rats enter through the broken door. The bujus stayed in the parking lot.

Amy went over to the elevator which apparently worked. I don't know if it had been working all along or not. The rats piled in after her and the arrow flashed down. "She's coming here." Said Jerry.

I looked around for something, anything really. On top of a cabinet were a couple of police batons. I grabbed one and handed one to Jerry. "Let's get to the elevator." It was just a few steps from the office.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened just as we got there. A robo-rat scooted out and I smacked it with the baton. That stopped it cold. Not even a twitch, but there were about ten more of them and Amy as well. Amy came out of the elevator and said "Awww!" as if I had just killed her pet hamster. "That was mean!"

Jerry and I backed away. "Amy, this has got to stop. I don't know what's wrong with you, but we need to fix it."

"What's wrong with me is that you won't love me!"

"Uh-oh." Said Jerry. "This could be bad."

"Schmuck. It's already bad!" I couldn't keep track of all the rats and one ran up my leg and onto my back. Suddenly there was a sharp pain in my shoulder as the synthetic rodent plunged a two inch sword into it. "Son of a bitch!" I cried and snatched it off of me and stepped on it hard. Bits of hard plastic flew out of its mouth. I was shaking with fear as I thought of the murdered convenience store kid.

"Stop killing them!" Shrieked Amy. She came at me. I swung the riot stick hard against her head. Her neck snapped. The skin tore open exposing plastic, metal, wires and fiber-optic cable. Her face immediately lost all expression and turned a pasty gray. She staggered. I hit her again and this time the head came off and she went down.

"My God!" said Katie.

"Oh man!" moaned Jerry, "That was like fifty million dollars worth of robot *and* the brains of this company you just broke!"

"Get the rest of the rats!" I yelled. Most of them were still in the elevator. Jerry and I jumped in and hit the close button. Two escaped but we started smashing the rest. It wasn't that easy in the confined space of the elevator because we had to avoid hitting each other but we were all done in about twenty seconds. Both of us took a couple more stabs before it was over and we were leaning against the walls bloodied and panting. Through the door of the elevator we heard Katie scream. I pounded the open button.

Katie looked like she had seen a ghost. “What happened?” asked Jerry breathlessly.

“She got up and left!” I looked around. Amy’s body was gone. The two remaining rats were trying to drag away her battered head. I walked over and smashed them. The second one I hit so hard that parts flew everywhere. Amy’s head was flat on one side with an eye missing. A foot of fiber-optic cable danged out of the neck. “Her brain wasn’t in her head. I knew that but it still scared the crap out of me when she got up!” She was actually shaking. Jerry put an arm around her and she clung to him fiercely. I had never seen Katie anything but competent and confident. Both I and Jerry were a good fifteen years older than her, but she was somehow the ‘adult’ among us. Seeing her so shaken up was disturbing.

“It doesn’t matter. She’s deaf and blind. She won’t get far.” Even so, we looked all around the garage and couldn’t find her. “Let’s go.” I pointed to the stairs.

We walked up. Mike’s body still lay outside the stairwell door. He had gone down on his knees and then slumped forward so his ass was left sticking up in the air. I kicked him and he rolled onto his side. There were two bujus wandering around in the parking lot. I tried Katie’s phone again, but it still didn’t work.

I went to try the phone at the front security desk when a voice came over the public address system. “You can’t call out until we’ve had a talk.” It was Amy’s voice.

“Amy?” She walked out from the elevator alcove and a disconcerting sight she was. She walked and moved with perfect grace in spite of her lack of a head. Between her shoulders was a cavity delineated with torn artificial skin and broken white plastic.

“You hurt me.” Came the voice over the PA. The security cameras on the ceiling tracked as she walked. She was plugged into the network using them to see and using the PA to talk. She was a lot harder to mistake for a human like this. “Why would you do that?”

“What’s with the rats? What’s with the bujus for Christ’s sake? You’ve gone nuts, Amy!”

She stood with fists on her hips. “I was just trying to connect with your personal history.” Her movements and postures were exactly the same as if she still had a head. She faced me and gestured toward me as if she could still see and hear me from the same reference point as before rather than a camera in a plastic dome on the ceiling.

“Those rats are not treasured memories!”

Jerry nudged me. “Maybe you shouldn’t argue with her.” He whispered. “She controls everything around here and getting her more pissed off is probably a bad idea.”

“Oh please! I am done accommodating that gearbox! Just let me get close to her with the club one more time.” I brandished the nightstick and took a step forward only to find myself suddenly seized from behind. My arms were pinned at my sides as I was held and lifted off the ground by in a bear hug from hugely muscled arms.

“Hey bro!” a deep friendly voice said into my ear. A Beefcake held me immobile from behind. I saw that Jerry and Katie were in similar predicaments. Katie’s stunner lay at the feet of her captor.

“Lemme go you giant sack of stupid!”

“He’ll put you down when I think the time is right”. Amy’s voice came from all around. She walked over and inclined her back slightly as if she were actually looking up at me. “I’m your best friend and you treat me like this.” She gestured toward the empty space above her shoulders.

“You were never my best friend unless you mean the way a master is a dog’s best friend.”

“Well, you’re a *bad dog*, Jake.”

“Fuck you!”

“Hey! Be polite.” Said the Beefcake holding me.

“Oh, you had your chance, but that ship has sailed.”

I sighed, at least as well as I could while being gripped by a muscle bound oaf of a robot. “Really? Being that literal isn’t like you…rather, it isn’t like Klutig. But that just shows that you are not her. I know you think you are, but you’re not.”

“Jake, don’t.” said Jerry. “Don’t piss her off more.”

“It’s not a *her*! This is a machine. You’re playing its game as long as you call it her.”

“Even so”, said Katie, “we are not in charge at the moment.”

The voice came over the PA as the headless robot pointed a finger at me. “*You* are in no position to define me! I am a person!”

“You are not. You’re a device some software made so it could walk around. The only human thing about you is that you are capable of stupidity!”

A feedback-like shriek came over the speakers and Amy slapped me hard in the face. That was the second time in an hour I had been smacked by a robot. Enough. I started kicking and struggling until the Beefcake lost its grip and I landed in a heap on the floor. My hand was within an inch of Katie’s stunner. I snagged it and jammed it into the ankle of the Beefcake before it could grab me again. The hefty robot hit the floor hard as I was struggling to my feet. I turned to the other two. “Put ‘em down!” I growled.

Robots don’t really have a strong impulse for self preservation. My waving the stunner at them instilled no fear even though they had just watched their comrade get burnt out. I grabbed up my billy-club and smacked the one holding Katie in the head. It was a lot more solidly built than Amy. There was a loud whack and the

skin on its scalp split open, but its neck didn't break. "Hey! Cut it out!" It said and took a step back. I jumped forward and jabbed it with the stunner. Katie yelped and the robot collapsed releasing her.

"Did you get some of the shock?" I asked her.

"Yes, damn it!" she said as she snatched the device out of my hand. She whipped around and quickly used the stunner on Jerry's Beefcake.

Amy had started to back away. Man, I wanted to destroy that thing badly. "I love you, Jake." said the voice over the speakers. "I wasn't ever going to hurt you."

"Well I'm gonna hurt *you*, bitch." I barely remember doing it. Jerry said that I continued to pound the robot's body with the nightstick long after it had stopped moving.

Ray, the night security man showed up a few minutes later and we explained the basics of what had happened. When Amy died, the network came back to normal and I was able to call the IT department and order them to take Amy's program off the main server.

Katie called an ambulance to take me and Jerry to the emergency room to have our little cocktail skewer sized sword wounds cleaned up.

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I resigned my position at Prototech and Katie stepped in to take my place being far more qualified. I collected a nice pension and moved back to Cambridge. I left Bunny at Prototech where he was cared for by a team of buju-bots who would sing and dance with him as much as he wanted.

I typed the whole thing, even the parts that make me look like a first class asshole. I was pretty sure that this was the book that people were actually going to want to read. I allowed Beiderman to tell me to start over not once but twice. He was now acting as my agent. Seeing as I hauled him out of Boston to edit a magazine that never quite happened I figured I owed him something and, truth be told, he had given me valuable advice.

At least no one died as a result of the Prototech thing unless you count Amy. I'm happy for that. I have a real nice pension so I won't need a stupid day job anymore and I'm *real* happy for that.

The book ought to do pretty well and the deal I have with Dave is that if it breaks big, I can write whatever I damn well please no matter how "juvenile" as he puts it. I already have it outlined. "Zorro on Mars!"

And other stories

Nowheresville

A screenplay

1. **Ext early morning**: It is raining hard in a narrow alley somewhere in the Big City. The shot is tight with black bars on either side giving the view a narrow, vertical frame. In the distance is a tiny slot of light, the street. There are a number of dumpsters on either side and the rain makes a constant rattling against the closed lids. A number of rats can be seen making their way along the walls.

2. E**xt early morning**: Closer on one of the dumpsters. We hear activity inside when the lid abruptly pops open. A disheveled and bruised young bearded man emerges. He has a blackened eye and a swollen lower lip. He has obviously suffered a beating recently. He is wearing a dirty trench coat over a dirty, but expensive looking suit. In his right hand he is holding a .45 automatic at ready. On his fingers are a couple of heavy, gold rings with showy gemstones. They are not tasteful, but they are obviously expensive. He looks around warily. He is clearly alert, even paranoid, a man on the run. His name is unimportant.

3. **Ext early morning**: Return to the first narrow view. A noise from offscreen, a voice in the distance causes the man to drop back into the dumpster and close the lid as quietly as possible.

First pursuer **(male)**
Where is that asshole?

Second pursuer **(also male)**
I thought heard something from over there.

We see two large men from behind as the jog up the alley from off screen. One of them stops to open the very dumpster in which we previously saw the man and looks inside.

First pursuer
Nothing here.

Second pursuer
He's not going to hide in a goddamn dumpster. He must have made it out to the street.

They run off down the alley and into the street and after a second of indecision, dash off to the right. There is a moment of silence where we hear only the falling rain then the dumpster lid pops open again and the young man emerges even dirtier than before, looks left and right and then attempts to hop out of the dumpster. He catches his foot and falls face first into a puddle.

4. **Ext early morning**. Close up on the young man's face as he lifts himself up from the puddle. His nose is flat and bloody and his face is dripping with God-knows-what.

Unimportant
Shit!

He gets right up and we only see his feet in the frame as he runs off toward the street.

5. **Ext early morning**. We see the man from the side as he runs through the alley. We can now see that the suit and the coat he wears are a few sizes too large for him. He raises the hand in which he holds the gun and hikes up the sleeve to view a device on his wrist.

6. **Ext early morning**. Close up on his wrist showing the hand with the .45 still gripped in it. There is a device on his wrist like a watch except much larger. It has an LCD screen about the size of a business card. We see that it shows a figure of **00:31:49**. It changes to **00:31:48** and then **00:31:47** as we watch. It is counting down. To *something*.

7. **Int early morning**. An apartment in the city. It is luxuriously appointed with deeply oiled wood paneled walls hung with oil paintings. One of them is recognizably a Rembrandt. There is a large shelf filled with leatherbound books, most of which appear to be quite old. There is a huge mahogany desk, very neatly kept on which sits a laptop computer, a phone and a sleeping Siamese cat. There is a window visible through which we can see

the pouring rain. An expensively dressed, heavyset, middle aged man sits at the desk talking on the phone. He is Myron Gates.

8. **Center on Gates**.

Gates **(on the phone)**

You have nothing to worry about sir; Stanton and Dawson are getting him now. If I have anything to say about it, he *will not* become a problem. (pause**) Yes, I understand. (**pause**) Of course I know that. (**pause**) no, I won't let you down, he's as good as back in your hands.**

He hangs up the phone and stares straight ahead for a second. Suddenly he snarls and brings his fist down hard on the desk making the phone and the computer bounce a bit and waking the cat who runs off.

Gates
FUCK!!!

9. **Int early morning**. Same room, wider shot. The two men who were chasing the guy with the gun burst in. They are soaking wet and stand facing the man at the desk dripping on and making footprints on an obviously priceless Persian carpet.

First pursuer **(**Stanton**)**
We lost him, Mister Gates.

Second pursuer **(**Dawson**)**
He dipped into an alley and that was the last we saw of him.

10. **Int early morning**. Close up on Gates. He is clearly pissed off.

Gates
Damn it! Why the hell do I keep a couple of jerk-offs like you on the payroll if you can't bring in one guy. He's just some drugged up punk, not James-fucking-Bond! How hard can it be?

11. **Int early morning**. Reverse on the two pursuers (Stanton and Dawson).

Stanton

I'm sorry Mister Gates. We'll try again.

12. **Int early morning**. Reverse on Gates**.**

Gates

Then get the hell out there! You have less than a half hour before you-know-what! The Secretary of Defense was tearing me a new one not one minute ago! If we blow this, we are screwed!

13. **Ext morning**. A bus stop in the city. Sitting on the bench under the shelter reading the sport section is a fat bald man with a huge paper cup of Dunkin Donuts coffee. A young woman in business clothes is sitting next to him rapidly working at the thumb board of a Blackberry. There is an old lady with a shopping basket who is looking to her left with a curious expression on her face. The camera pans right to show the young man with the unimportant name standing waiting for the bus being rained on outside the shelter. He is a mess. In spite of the fact that his clothing is expensive, he looks like he has spent at least two nights sleeping in dumpsters and under bridges. He is doing his best to look nonchalant, but he's filthy and has a gun stuck in the front of his pants. There's nothing he can do about that. A bus pulls into the frame obscuring everyone at the stop from view.

14. **Int of the bus, morning**. The young man is getting on behind the old lady. He reaches in his pocket and realizes that he has no change.

15. **Int of the bus**. Close up of the man's hand as he removes one of the gold rings.

16. **Int of the bus**. The young man extends his hand with the ring toward the driver.

17. **Int of the bus**. Close up on the driver. His eyes get big. He reaches for the ring and takes it, then reaches in his own pocket and puts change in the hopper.

18. **Int of the bus**. Two shot of the man and the driver at the front of the bus. The driver waves the man on.

Bus Driver

Pleasure doing business with you!

The man makes his way to a seat near the back.. He sits down and looks at the device on his wrist.

19. **Int of the bus**. Close up of the device on his wrist. It now shows **00:22:40** and is still counting down.

20. **Cut to Int morning**: Gates' apartment. Gates is on the phone again. The cat is now asleep on the windowsill while the rain still pounds down.

Gates **(on the phone)**

So, you spotted him?

21. **Cut to Ext street**. Stanton is standing under the awning of a closed florist shop talking on a cell phone. The rain is coming down in sheets making an awful racket.

Stanton

He was getting on a bus just as we came around the corner.

21. **Cut back to Gates' apartment**:

Gates

So why didn't you follow him in the car?

22. **Cut back to Stanton**:

Stanton

Dawson did, but I stayed behind just in case he gave us the slip. This guy is smarter than he looks.

23.**Cut back to Gates**.

Gates

Either that or you guys are *way* stupider than even I think you are!

24.**Cut back to Stanton**.

Stanton

Don't worry, Mister Gates. Dawson's gonna head him off. We'll get him.

He snaps the cell phone closed.

Stanton

You fat fuck.

25.**Cut to Int morning on the bus**. The young man is sitting with his head back. He obviously hasn't had decent sleep in some time. A teenage kid is sitting next to him looking him over. The kid's eyes come to rest on the device attached to the man's wrist.

Kid

Hey mister.

The man ignores him. The kid gives him a gentle nudge**.**

Kid

Hey Mister.

The man stirs. His eyes open. He looks tiredly annoyed**.**

Unimportant

What? What the hell you want, kid?

Kid

Wazzat thing on your arm, mister?

26.**Int of the bus**. Close up on the man. His expression is strange, sort of a “I know something you don’t know” kind of look. A mixture of dread and humor. His eyes are bottomless wells of fatality.

Unimportant

You don’t wanna know, kid.

27. **Cut back to two shot of the kid and the man**.

Kid

I don’t? Then why’d I ask? C’mon, man, what is it?

Unimportant

It’s the end of the line. It’s all she wrote. It’s the fat lady’s song. It’s a one way ticket to Nowheresville.

The kid looks both puzzled and impatient. His expression is one of someone who isn't interested in quasi-poetic crap**.**

Kid

Hey, that's some real pretty talk, mister, but I still don't know what that thing is.

28. **Cut to a close up of the device**: It now reads **00:16:26.**

29.**Cut to two shot of the man an the kid**.

Unimportant

You ever hear of "anti-matter"?

Kid

No. Is that thing made of it?

Unimportant

It's got some inside of it. Twelve hundred micrograms. It's some bad stuff, kid. It makes everything it touches go away.

Kid

Huh! I know a couple of people I'd like to touch with it! My Gym teacher. My Dad, that asshole. That fucktard, Jimmy.

Unimportant

This little bit will make the *city* go away in about fifteen minutes. I gotta split, kid. I gotta get out of the city.

The kid ponders for a couple of seconds**.**

Kid

Maybe you should have taken a cab instead of the bus. Maybe a driver wouldn't let you in 'cause of the way you smell.

Unimportant

I got no bread, kid.

30.**Cut to Ext morning**. A car is racing along behind the bus with Dawson at the wheel. He tries unsuccessfully a couple of time to cut the bus off but is thwarted by other cars blocking him in the morning commuter rush. He has a headset on and is in communication with Stanton.

Dawson

I can't get ahead of 'em! It looks like traffic might end up gridlocked before too long! The rain is making people drive all kinds of stupid.

31.**Cut back to the bus**. Two shot of the man and the kid**.**

Kid

So…did you invent it?

Unimportant

C'mon, kid, do I look like that kind of egghead?

32.**Cut to. Int night. Gates' apartment**. It is dark with the only light coming in through a window. A combination of moonlight and streetlights.

Caption

Two nights ago.

V.O. Unimportant

I stole it like I stole these clothes! I got 'em out of an apartment.

A shadow is seen on the fire escape outside the window. The man is shown forcing open the window and entering. He has a flashlight that he casts about the room. It is he, the one with the unimportant name, in jeans, sneakers and a gray hooded sweatshirt.

33. **Close up of the flashlight beam shining on the desk**. There is an expensive looking pen sitting on the blotter . The man's hand reaches into the frame and grabs it. The hand pulls open the desk drawer. The device is sitting on top of a folder marked TOP SECRET-EYES ONLY.

34. **Full figure on the man**. He is looking at the device. He sees that it has sort of a double watch band. Without a second's thought he clasps it onto his right wrist. It seems easier than sticking it in his pocket. It makes a sound like a handcuff locking when it goes on. It makes a beep and the screen on it lights up**.**

35. **Close up of the device**. It reads **49:59:56** and is counting down. He immediately tries to unlock it without success**.**

Unimportant

Ahhh….I'll figure it out later…

V.O. Unimportant

I was doing pretty good. There were some nice suits in the closet and some cash in the bedroom. I just can't get the bracelet thing off. It's locked.

36. **Int day. A motel room**. The man is tied to a chair. He is now wearing Gates' suit. He has been beaten up. There are three guys standing over him. Stanton, Dawson and a third guy.

V.O. Unimportant

These guys caught me a day later and beat me up and kept asking who I worked for. They finally figured out that I wasn't who they thought I was. I think they told me what it was just to see the look on my face, the assholes. Told me it was stuck on me for the duration. There was no key or combo. They were planning to kill me and then saw my arm off. I *freaked out* man!

37.**Close up of the man's hands working his bonds loose**. The device on his wrist reads **00:18:52**.

38. **A shot of the third guy from behind. He has a .45 stuck in his belt in the back of his pants**. A hand, strange device on wrist, reaches into the frame and grabs the gun. In slow motion, the guy spins around and a shot fires. His chest is fountaining blood.

V.O. Unimportant

I grabbed a gun and shot one of 'em and I ran away, but I can't get it off!

39. **Back to the two shot of the man and the kid on the bus**.

Kid

Shit! I would've cut my arm off!

Unimportant

I thought of that, but I didn't think I would have the strength to get far enough away in time. I don't think I have the nerve either.

Kid

So what's your name?

Unimportant

My name is unimportant! We're all gonna be shakin' hands with Jesus in a few minutes!

He looks around.

Unimportant

The traffic has stopped! I gotta split!

He gets up**.**

40. **Cut to long shot of the bus stuck in traffic**. The door opens and the man gets out and starts running through the rain. The visibility is poor, everyone are just silhouettes.

41. **Cut to view inside of Dawson's car**. He's yelling into the head set**.**

Dawson

Holy shit! He's on foot, I'm gonna go get 'em.

42. **Cut to exterior shot of Dawson's car**. He abandons it in traffic and starts to run after the man. He pulls out a gun and fires a shot in his direction. We hear a few shouts and a woman screams in panic. Traffic comes to a dead halt.

43. **Long shot of the man running ahead of Dawson**. He turns and returns fire. People on the sidewalk are running for cover. There isn't a cop in sight. One is never around when you need one.

44. **Close up of the man's wrist as he fires two more shots**. The audio is "close up" too, the shots are deafeningly loud. The device on his wrist shows **00:09:12** and counting.

45. **Cut to Gates on the phone with Stanton**. He is pacing around his desk and looks like he has been sweating profusely**.**

Gates

Stanton, you have to get down there with Dawson and catch that freak. They're going to have me up on every charge their little minds can dream up if this thing goes any more sour!

46. **Cut to Stanton, now walking along a crowded sidewalk in the pouring rain**.

Stanton

Sir, why did you even have that thing in your house?

47. **Cut back to Gates.** Close up on his face.

Gates

Who the hell do you think you are asking me a question like that? Who the *fuck* do you think you are? People were interested. People with money. *Big* money! Comprende? I could have *owned* my own country! Owned it outright. The whole godamned shooting match. The land, the buildings, the people. I could eat my meals off of them if I wanted! Then this little punk…this nobody…this *asshole*…comes along and….AAAGGGGHHHH!

48. **Cut back to Stanton**.

Stanton

Sir, you had better get a grip. We're coming down to the wire here.

49. **Back to Gates**.

Gates

Don't you tell *me* to get a grip, fuckface! Just get that punk and bring me back my product!

He throws the receiver at the wall which wakes up the cat who bolts from the room with a loud hiss**.**

50. **Back to Stanton who is snapping his phone closed**.

That guy needs killing.

He stops alerted by the sound of distant gunfire. The sound is barely audible through the pounding rain**.**

51. **Cut to shot of a huge traffic jam**. Dawson and the man are dodging between cars and exchanging shots here and there. There are *still* no cops to be seen.

52. **The man is backing cautiously past the window of a car where a woman is holding a toddler close to her breast**. Both she and the child are quaking in fear from the gunfight going on around them. Suddenly the child cries out, startling the man and his weapon discharges with a loud report causing the woman to scream and the child to start crying.

53. **Cut to Dawson several cars away**. The visibility is terrible, but he heard the sound of the shot and the woman's scream. He starts heading in that direction.

54. **Cut to close up of the man's wrist**. The device reads **00:06:16**.

55.**Close up of Dawson's face**. He is dripping with water, his clothes are clinging to him. It's actually hard to move in the driving rain. Horns are honking almost constantly. Babies are crying, people are shouting and finally, a siren can be heard in the distance.

Dawson

Enough of this shit. Lets make some space.

He reaches inside his jacket and withdraws a peculiar looking device, a bristly looking hand weapon of uncertain pedigree. He points it in the direction from which he heard the man and pulls the trigger**.**

56. **Longshot with Dawson far to the left of the screen**. A blast of crackling plasma issues from the device in his hand and the car that was shielding the man suddenly vaporizes.

57. **Cut to a quick shot of the woman in the car with her child as they evaporate into their component atoms**. Now Dawson stands in clear view. He levels the weapon directly at the camera and pulls the trigger again.

58. **Cut to the view from Dawson's perspective**. The man's eyes go wide and he instantly drops to the ground. At the same instant, a cop car comes directly into the path of the plasma jet and is instantly vaporized. So much for the authorities. Things have gotten *way* out of hand.

59. **Full figure on the man as he gets up and bolts.** In the poor visibility of the rain, he quickly disappears.

60. **Back on Dawson**.

Dawson

Son of a…

61. **Cut to Ext morning**. The docks. The shot is all gray. The agitated sea, the warehouses, the various boats, all gray. The only color is a few men making their way around in bright yellow raincoats. The man comes running into the shot. He turns around and points his gun and pulls the trigger. Nothing. Out of ammo. He sighs and tosses the gun aside. He runs out of shot.

62.**Cut to Dawson running into a different part of the dock neighborhood**. He looks left and right and cocks his ear as if he hears something. There is a noise coming from inside the warehouse right next to him. He flings open a door and enters.

Dawson

Where are you, ya junkie asshole?

63. **Cut to elsewhere in the warehouse**. The man is in there up on a high shelf hidden by several crates. The side of one of them comes off when he leans against it and he looks inside.

Unimportant (**softly**)

Oh-ho!

64. **Close up on the man's wrist**. The gizmo reads **00:04:34**.

65. **Dawson is wandering around between the shelves**. There is a sudden rustling sound and he looks up to see the man. He points the plasma ray and fires Just as the man holds up a mirror. The ray is reflected back at him and he is instantly vaporized. The man jumps down and runs out**.**

66. **From the man's point of view we see the door of the warehouse as he is running out**. There is a hacksaw hanging from a nail near the door. Next to it on the floor is a roll of duct-tape**.**

67. **Close up on the hacksaw**. The man's hand reaches into the frame and pulls it down. Another snags the duct-tape.

68. **The man is shown running out of a warehouse door as the building bursts into flames**. Who the hell knows why**.**

69. **The man is seen from behind as he leaps into a motorboat.** He starts up the motor.

70. **From a distance we see the boat speeding over a choppy sea**.

71. **Same view, greater distance**. The boat looks very small.

72. **Same view, even greater distance**. The boat is just a dot.

73. **Same view, still greater distance**. We can't see the boat at all just its wake in the water. Suddenly a sphere of light expands to a huge size, at least a kilometer in diameter. The light winks out and for an instant we see a spherical

void. Everything in that space has simply ceased to exist. The water of the ocean looks like a great bowl, the clouds above have been neatly cloven so as to perfectly describe the spherical shape. It persists for but a second, then everything starts to rush into the vacuum. The water slides inward and rises into a great fountain and the air rushes in with a sound like the mother of all thunderclaps! A shockwave is blown out dispersing the rainclouds and letting the sun shine down upon the wounded sea.

74. **Cut to Stanton.** He has just gotten past the traffic jam when he sees a fast moving cloud coming up the street. Ahead of it is a mass of tumbling debris including dumpsters, cars and parts of buildings. The cloud rushes in and the shot goes black.

75. **A shot from above of the city as the shockwave makes its way in from the waterfront slowing down after a few blocks**. Buildings on the waterfront are pummeled, we see siding and shingles torn from them, but the shockwave stops before it gets into downtown.

76. **Downtown**. The rain has stopped, but there are wild unpredictable winds blowing. Stanton and many others have been buried by debris.

77. **Close on a pile of debris**. A crumpled garbage can, newspapers, some pieces of random lumber and siding blown off of nearby buildings. A few pieces suddenly shift aside and Stanton stands up. He is dirty and scratched up, but otherwise in one piece. He looks around.

78. **Distant shot toward the harbor from Stanton's point of view**. There is a ring of clear sky over the harbor. In the center, rising from the water is a pillar-shaped white cloud. Most of the buildings in the direction of the waterfront have surface damage, but most are still standing. A good number of cars have been overturned and almost every car in the city has its alarm going off.

79. **Close up on Stanton**.

Stanton

Shee-it!

He exhales and coughs a few times and shakes mud off of himself**.**

Stanton

I'm coming, Mister Gates.

80. **Full figure on Stanton**. Other people are either getting to their feet or attempting to dig others out. Stanton turns around and starts walking back up in the direction he came from. As he walks off, the rain begins to fall again.

81. **Cut to Gates looking out of his apartment window**. His face is ashen. He turns around and whips open his desk drawer.

82. **Close up of the contents of the drawer**. There is a passport and several bundles of cash, both American and Euros. He grabs the lot.

83. **On the street we see Gates hailing a cab.** There is general chaos. People are running too and fro. A cab pulls up and Gates gets in.

84.**Int taxicab**. View of the back seat from the front. Gates hurriedly gets in. He is already soaked with rain.

Gates

Get me to the airport. I don't care what shortcuts you take!

The camera pulls back to reveal that the cabdriver is Stanton. He turns around and points a gun at Gates.

85. **Shot from the side showing Stanton leaning over the seat pointing the gun at Gates.** Suddenly Gates reaches into his jacket and withdraws one of the plasma weapons like Dawson had. He points and both he and Stanton fire at once.

86. **Shot of the cab from outside**. Gates has miscalculated horribly in using the energy weapon in a confined space. The entire cab suddenly glows and vaporizes

leaving only a black stain on the pavement which is being rapidly washed away by the rain.

87. **Cut to: The waterfront the burning warehouse has been snuffed out by the explosion**. There is a litter of broken parts of small boats and pieces of the docks everywhere. There is a trail of blood leading from the dock to a pile rubble, rope and broken crates. About halfway along the trail, a bloody hacksaw lies in a pool of blood. From under the rubble pile, the man crawls out. His right hand is gone and the stump is wrapped tightly with duct tape. Even so, blood oozes out from various places.

89. **Close up on his face**. He is looking out to sea. His face shows pain, but also wonder.

Unimportant

Shit, that was intense!

Fade to black.

90. Fade back in. Int. Night. It's a noisy bar that has a lot of college types. It's probably Friday night. There is a wide-eyed *college chick* sitting at a table she is listening with rapt interest to a young man whose back is to the camera. Although we cannot yet see his face, he is the young man called "unimportant". He is wearing trendy clothes. His right hand has been replaced by a hook-like prosthesis.

91. Cut to two shot of Unimportant and college chick. A caption flashes on the screen for a few seconds.

Caption

Eight months later.

The noise fades to the background and we can hear what they are saying.

Unimportant

…anyway, that's how I lost the hand.

92. Close on the college chick.

College chick

You’re so totally full of shit!

Fade to black. Roll credits.

Pages from an unfinished biography.

*I was told that this passage from my unpublished book "**Life's Improper Number; The Unsavory Story of Brother Nathus**", deserves something of an explanation. Like many writers, I have started several ill fated projects. In 1999, I set out to write a biography of the famous and famously strange televangelist the Reverend Brother Nathus Myron Henry. I never got past the first chapter (a mere introduction, really) because his church, The Crucible of Faith, which seats twenty-five-thousand and provides fully half the jobs in Masonville Crossing, Georgia threatened to sue me and my publisher for more money than I have ever heard of. Since that time, various scandals, lawsuits and criminal proceedings directed at him and his church have made him much less of a threat as frivolous litigation must be prohibitively expensive for Brother Nathus given his much diminished means these days and his status as a long term guest of the state of Georgia. I'm no longer really worried about the consequences of what I have written seeing print, but the story of his years of transition from rock 'n' roll idol to "The Voice of God in America" and finally to the "very symbol of degenerate perversion and perhaps the incarnation on Earth of Satan himself" as his one time golf buddy Vice President Cheney phrased it, has now been told many times. The history of those years Brother Nathus spent as a seminal rocker, however, is all but forgotten and that story sheds much light on the events of later years.*

Chapter
1

The Legend of Hoppin' Henry

Nathus Myron Henry was born at one-thirty a.m. on July fifth 1935 at a filling station on a stretch of road that ran through what was at that time an unincorporated section of Lamont county Tennessee. This one pump garage was also the home of its proprietor, Myron Henry. The impending arrival of Nathus was at first misinterpreted as a reaction to some holiday barbeque potato salad that had sat too long in the summer heat, but the real cause of Lori-Ann Henry's stomach pains soon became apparent. His father named the baby for himself and for his own father who had died earlier that same year. The unusual moniker of Myron's father was supposedly derived from that of the only leper identified by

name in the New Testament. Curiously, there is no such person so named in the New Testament or any other part of the Bible, Apocrypha or related texts and the name appears to have been simply made up, nonetheless, the grandfather believed it for his entire life and young Nathus likewise until he was well into adulthood when he told the story to a radio interviewer who happened to know the scripture chapter and verse.

Nathus spent his early years playing in the enormous trash heap behind the station. At the age of six, he found an old and warped ukulele that was home to a family of mice. He evicted the rodents and the distressed uke became his first instrument. Father Myron was worried that he was going to be drafted and sent to fight the Japanese but when called up for his physical, it was discovered that he lacked the required intellectual acumen to be a soldier, a terminology that he liked so much that it became his preferred excuse under most circumstances and one which was generally accepted*. Thus Nathus was not deprived of his father's presence in his life as he learned the art of music and his father played innumerable blues and hillbilly records for him. Nathus also acquired a large collection of various movie magazines. By the time he was ten, Nathus had taken to driving an old tractor that was capable of no more than ten miles per hour to get into the nearby town of Erving's Corner where there was an actual movie theater that also hosted live shows both theatrical and musical. Here Nathus saw many nickel matinees featuring characters like Flash Gordon, Tarzan and Superman and also performances by blues and country singers. He became particularly fond of attending the live shows on "colored days" and became familiar with the work of many contemporary black performers. Young Nathus abandoned his original life's ambition of growing up to be Captain Marvel. Now his only desire was to grow up to be a Negro.

Nathus got a job selling popcorn in the theater when he was eleven and soon after bought his first guitar for eight dollars mail order from Sears. The next four years were devoted to learning his new instrument. He studied at the feet of any of the hundreds musicians who drifted through Erving's Corner and by his sixteenth year,

***In an interview for PLAYBOY magazine in 1972, Henry related this story about his father.**
"Daddy was actually a great wit. Once he was trying to fix the brakes on a car that belonged to a man who was passing through the county and was having some trouble getting the adjustment quite right. Well the man came calling to ask what was taking him so long and Daddy said 'Th'army says I lacks the innelectual acumen' and he figured that the fancy language would put the feller off. So anyway, the man says 'Are you trying to tell me you're too stupid to fix my car, mister?' And Daddy said, heck this still makes me laugh down to this very day, Daddy said 'No, *you're* ***stupid!' and threw a crescent wrench at his forehead. Daddy was a pretty good shot and that feller went down like a sack of Navy Beans! I said 'I guess you told*** *him*, ***Daddy!' and Daddy said 'Well, I guess I did!' We all got a pretty good laugh out of that one."***

he was the finest guitarist in the county. His real heroes were Bob Wills and the emerging performers of the new form of blues called “rock ‘n’ roll”. He joined a local band called “The Highway Kings” and got himself an electric guitar at the price of almost four weeks wages but he knew it was worth it. Rock ‘n’ roll was calling him. For over a year, the band played dances, picnics and other events throughout Lamont county and he found himself making more money than he had selling popcorn and was able to buy himself a used car. They even aroused the interest of a local DJ who was interested in branching out into music promotion. He arranged for the band to record a single.

It was at this point that Nathus Henry had the first of several career setbacks. He had started a relationship with Lynette May, the thirteen year old sister of Johnny May, the band’s singer and front man. Johnny found out that the seventeen year old Nathus had “sullied” his sister and flew into a rage and showed up at the gas station with a shotgun. Nathus felt that the most prudent course of action was to vacate Lamont County and head for Nashville. There he started appearing in clubs as “Hoppin’ Henry, The Master of the Rock and Roll”.

It was in Nashville that Hoppin’Henry finally put out his first record with the help of a local club owner. The song was a local hit and it was an original Hoppin’ Henry composition.

Run Around

(1953)

Hey little girl, you’re so innocent,
Hey little girl, you’re so sweet
Hey little girl, don’t go home to your mama,
Jump in my car and run around with me.

We gotta run, we gotta run, we gotta run around
We gotta run, we gotta run, we gotta run around
We gotta run, we gotta run, we gotta run around
We gotta run, we gotta run, we gotta run around
Hey little girl, ya gotta run around with me!

Hey little girl, you’re so pretty,
Hey little girl, you’re such a treat
Hey little girl, your daddy won’t miss you
Open up the door and take a seat!

We gotta run, we gotta run, we gotta run around
We gotta run, we gotta run, we gotta run around
We gotta run, we gotta run, we gotta run around
We gotta run, we gotta run, we gotta run around
Hey little girl, ya gotta run around with me!

Compared with other songs that were getting play on w radio stations with white audiences, *Run Around* seemed bold and sexy. At this time there were a number of white artists who were making music inspired by black artists, but there was still some resistance to the trend to say the least. Some older people were more than willing to identify Hoppin' Henry as yet another source of the growing immorality of society. The younger people thought differently. Shortly after the release of *Run Around* , Henry played a high school dance that was soon disrupted when a hundred girls started screaming and rushed the stage. No one had seen anything like it since Sinatra first came on the scene. After a few more incidents like that, Hoppin' Henry decided that he needed first class representation and got an interview with Mark Schneiderman, who was well on his way to becoming the hottest talent agent in the South. Schneiderman went to work on distributing *Run Around* nationally and quickly got a deal to produce two more records. The first of these. *It's O.K.*, became a number one national hit and Hoppin' Henry, the legend was truly born!

It's O.K.
(1955)

Oh, oh oh baby please don't make me blue
You know I'm in love with you.
Yes I know you're still in school,
but that's no cause for you to be cruel.
I don't care what your mama say,
it's O.K. to love me!

Li'l girl you know that I want you bad
And I ain't afraid of your dad,
even though he's got a gun,
That won't put me on the run.
And I don't care what the Police say,

It's O.K. to love me!

This couldn't have happened at a better time as Nathus needed some money pretty badly. It seems that he had gotten a local school girl named Wanda Peterson in a bit of trouble that would result in the birth of his first daughter Jayney-Anne. He managed to avoid getting either married or shot by giving two thousand dollars to the girl's father and pledging to support the child, a promise he kept.

Hoppin' Henry hit New York like a hurricane. He was featured on the touring Great Rock 'n' Roll Rally that included acts like Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and Carl Perkins. On this tour he introduced *Baby-doll Darlin'* which would be a monster hit within days.

Baby-doll Darlin'
(1956)

Baby-doll darlin, you're so sweet,
When I see you skipping down the street,
Oh, Baby-doll darlin' come with me,
I wanna be your daddy, can't you see?

Baby-doll darlin' won't you come my way,
Time to get that baby-doll put away.
Don't you know that you're a big girl now?
Come on up to my place and I'll show you how.

Baby-doll Darlin' your time has come,
You gotta go with me and have some fun.
Baby-doll darlin' you're so fine,
Put the baby-doll down and come be mine.

Baby-doll darlin'
I said baby-doll darlin'
C'mon baby-doll darlin',
I want you to be mine!

Hoppin' Henry suddenly had legions of fans, mostly teen girls, who showed up at the concerts with baby-dolls in hand. In the audience of one show, a girl named Emma Saxton, 14, of Scarsdale, New York caught his eye. He met with her after the show and they announced their plan to marry less than a week later.

A judge willing to perform the ceremony couldn't be found in the New York area, so Henry booked a private flight to Birmingham, Alabama where they were wed on June 2nd, 1956. When Hoppin' Henry rejoined the tour in Philadelphia, he was promptly arrested for co-habiting with Emma and violations of the Mann act. Both his and Emma's protestations of true love were ignored and his extradition to New York was expedited. Henry was able to cut a deal with the DA that included a quick annulment and his agreement to avoid young girls in the State of New York without a proper chaperone.

Even with this little bump along the way, Hoppin' Henry grew from strength to strength as a performer and his records sold like the proverbial hotcakes. From late 1956 and into the summer of 1957, Henry had some of his most enduring hits, The Christmas season hit *I'll take you to see Santa,* the rocking *Li'l Darling* and *Playin' House,* and the sad ballad, *She said She was Eighteen.* Hoppin' Henry secured his status as one of the greats of early rock 'n' roll during this fertile period.

In September of 1957, Myron Henry was killed in an automobile accident, apparently a drunken game of "chicken" gone wrong. He had just turned 40 three days before. Nathus went home for the funeral and to comfort his grieving mother and also had a chance to mend fences with his old band, The Highway Kings. Johnny May was eager to make up with Nathus now that he had made it big and since he showed little renewed interest in Lynette, now 18, it seemed that the source of their discord had passed. The Highway Kings became the new back up band for Hoppin' Henry.

Around this same time, unknown to Hoppin' Henry, his second child, a son, was born to Emma Saxton. She named him Nathus Henry Saxton. Today he performs as a rock act under the name of Hoppin' Henry Junior and is the only of Hoppin' Henry's twelve (all save one, illegitimate) children to go into show business.

When he played the Ed Sullivan Show in early 1958, Hoppin' Henry had the number 1,2 and 4 songs on the charts. The studio audience that night was jammed with screaming girls clutching baby dolls. Even "The Pelvis" himself would have been hard pressed to match the reaction. That month he released *Pretty Little Thing,* which was destined to be the biggest hit of his career.

Pretty Little Thing

(1958)

How'd the good Lord make a pretty little thing like you?
How'd the good Lord make a pretty little thing like you?

If you talk to me I never will be blue.

When I see you walkin' my heart skips a beat or two,
When I hear you talkin' it's like music, yes it's true
Go with me and I'll always be true.

In all my life,
through all my strife
I never knew someone as sweet
Those ruby lips
How she swings those hips
As she walks down the street (oh, yeah!)

How'd the good Lord make a pretty little thing like you?
When I see you there's just nothin' I can do
If you come with me I always will love you.

Pretty little thing, come and keep me warm
Hoppin' Henry will never do you any harm
Just want to have you in my ever-lovin' arms.

Henry was approached in 1960 by Hollywood producers to star in a musical film similar to those that had been done by Elvis Presley. The deal almost fell through because he wanted to write the script himself and title it *John F. Kennedy is a Communist Loving Bastard.* Cooler heads prevailed and the movie that was eventually titled *Rock 'n' Roll Fever* had a much less topical theme. *Rock 'n' Roll Fever* was a sanitized version of Hoppin Henry's own life story although actresses over twenty-one years old played all the women in his life. The movie was an enormous hit and Hoppin Henry proved to be as magnetic on the screen as he was on stage.

Needing money, 16 year old Emma Saxton went to the National Enquirer with her son in tow to sell her story. The scandal was a national sensation that became even more sensational when Wanda Peterson made herself known. Throughout the nation, church and civic organizations as well as hundreds of ad-hoc decency leagues sponsored Hoppin' Henry record burning events. His movie was boycotted and picketed everywhere it was exhibited. In light of these events, Hoppin' Henry felt the time was ripe for a European Tour.

Hoppin' Henry and the Highway Kings played to record crowds in London, Paris, Amsterdam and Hamburg. There were screaming hordes of girls with baby-dolls everywhere he went. The European girls were very welcoming and Henry left a trail of broken hearts and fatherless children across the continent as the tour went on. Encouraged, he continued on to Japan and Australia and didn't return to the USA for two years. By the time he returned, times had changed. Schneiderman wouldn’t return his calls. Pop music now belonged to mop-topped boys with British accents.

Henry still was able to work clubs here and there which he had to do to make a living. The paternity suits were still there waiting for him and he finally had to face the music. In the end, all he had to show for the money he had made was a custom 1960 El Dorado, a cherry red Fender guitar and twenty-one pairs of alligator shoes. After the lawyers were done with him, Hoppin' Henry faded into obscurity…until 1968, that is.

My Short Career in the Big Game

(From the never to be published memoir “When I was Drinking”)

I don’t know if many people are aware of it, but I played a season with the Atlantic City Poiuyts in the seventies. I don’t remember which year. It was when I was drinking.

Man, those were the days when it was a real game! Not like the candy-assed version they play today. You had to be both tough and flexible just to walk into the locker room, and utterly lack both fear and sanity to run onto the field! I was signed on as a reserve overblat (based on the fact the last guy’s uniform fit me and my poor math skills) and as a result, I was concerned that I wouldn’t get much time on the flutney. Of course, I needn’t have bothered myself, there is a saying in the sport “anything can happen to an overblat.” Oh, can it ever, I would learn!

It was my privilege to play on the same squad with the nigh mythic full frummert, Draja Druvnik in the waning years of his career. How well I remembered seeing him run the famous “iron woomik” play when I was a young lad. Disappointingly, my conversation with this legendary player was limited as he spoke Esperanto as his first and only language. This was made an even greater annoyance because on any given day one of my team mates would solemnly enjoin me to “listen to Draja! He knows all the tricks!” Once, upon asking his advice, he replied “*Via patrina armeo botoj estas plej moda*.” A fat lot of help that was!

My best friend on the team was Carl Yoelin, one of the wicket-men, who became the hero of our game against the Evanston Echidnas when he swallowed the pritz rather than give it up to the hated “monotremes”. He was a Menonite from a county in Southern Wisconsin that nobody had ever heard of. “It makes Satan happy that you’re a Jew. Think about it.” He used to say. Carl knew the rules to hundreds of card games in spite of the fact that his religion forbade him from playing any of them. It just seemed so perverse, but perversity was the norm in this game.

That year, the house band was the Ventnor Heights Marching Gamelan and they were a rip-roaring first class outfit if ever there was one! After the fourth ogre of every home game, they came out and played “Look Out Little Ruth” while marching in formation in the shape of pancakes and bacon. It was a show stopper! You just don’t see stuff like that anymore.

Being a reserve man, I spent most of my time “guarding the dummy” if you know what I mean. Don’t get me wrong, it was an honor just to be there and it was a weekly paycheck to boot. As I have previously noted, my time on the flutney was abbreviated and much of it involved degradation and humiliation, but anyone can tell you that in this sport, degradation and humiliation is about as scarce as blondes in Stockholm, so I didn’t feel singled out.

It was in the seventh ogre of my final game, that my big moment came! We were facing the Allentown ‘Pataphysicians (that was before the ‘Pats were absorbed into Allegheny League the same year the game was declared illegal in Texas) and I was called out to run guard whilst Druvnik carried the pritz! The crowd rose and hurled insults at the team and each other as the play commenced. An opposing backup fink called out a taunt apparently aimed specifically at Druvnik. “*La mondo ne estas salut vi elkore, sed kun kunprimita fiston!”* I don’t know what it meant, but according to the rules, it had to be a quote from Goldwater.

Allentown had durmished on the last play and our team needed two woomiks for an appeal-proof win. What a moment! I raised my frullip in triumph as I jogged beside the sport’s greatest player. Our flippers were slapping in unison upon the field as we heard the ‘Pats outside grouch call out “*Mi tio es infermo, pero la carreterra es verde*!” The pritz sailed in a high arc over the flutney and descended right over our heads.

“Go for it, Draja!” I shouted and the living legend craned his neck deftly catching the ibex-hide in his teeth!

I was reaching to give Druvnik a congratulatory pat on the back when a sharp pain caused me instantly to curl up like a cocktail shrimp and lie on the ground helplessly trying to draw breath! I looked up to discover that it was Druvnik himself who had jabbed the pointy end of his frullip into my testicles just for a lark. “*Vi bonsorta knabo!*” He shouted gleefully after spitting out the ball, “*Mi u diras al vi unu afero filo. Neniu senescepte pruntedojn mono viro kun humuro*!!” At that point the Baggage Smasher handed me a penalty for “not taking it like a man” and was sent back to the bench.

The next week I quit the team and decided to run for congress, but that’s another story.